

Ember's Fire
The Standish Clan, #2
A Hearts of Harkness Novel
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Chapter 1

EMBER STANDISH *tap-tapped* the trunk of a leaning birch at that one particular bend where a tiny, unnamed spring fed into the Prince River, for no other reason than she'd double-tapped that tree dozens of times before. Though not in a very long while. Nearly ten years.

Picard's camp. That's where she was headed, and she was almost there—two miles from her starting point at the base of the mountain where she'd left her two brothers.

Her gut tightened at the thought of what awaited her there. *Who* awaited her.

For about the hundredth time, she thrust the thought away. It was a beautiful fall afternoon and she intended to enjoy it as long as she could.

She looked down at the gully in front of her. She could probably pick her way across the moss-slippery rocks without even getting her hiking boots wet, but where was the fun in that? Grinning, she reached up, wrapped gloved hands around the leaning birch and swung herself out and over the narrow stream, releasing her grasp to land lightly on the other side.

Nailed it!

Her smile widened.

This was rough terrain, but the challenge only invigorated her. After a decade away, it was good to know she was still up for anything this land could dish out.

Ah, Ember Standish, you've still got it.

"Make that *Dr.* Ember Standish." Sometimes she had to remind herself.

Okay, she *liked* to remind herself. She'd put ten years and countless hours of classes, studying and residency training between the woman she was now and the girl she'd been when last she made this hike along the Prince River.

Well, not technically a girl. She had been all of eighteen, waiting for Jace's arrival, her stomach jumping with nervousness and yes, hot anticipation.

He had been one year older...

She drew a deep breath, filling her lungs with the cool, fresh air. She wasn't a girl anymore. This time when she faced Jace Picard, she would do so as a woman. A successful, educated, confident woman.

Not that she'd ever lacked for confidence. Even as an adolescent—hell, even during those awkward pre-teen years—she'd been self-assured. She'd always done well academically. Spectacularly well, actually. And though she liked her eyelash curler and lip gloss as much as the next woman, she'd never been beauty queen material. Too many freckles for that, and her nose had that little bump in it. She'd inherited those things from her mother, Margaret Standish, along with her pale skin, red hair, and green eyes, and that was all right with her. Even when kids teased her about her carrot top, she'd never really wanted to change it. Well, there was that one time in undergrad when she'd gone through a white-streak phase...

She smiled at the memories. It would have been impossible to grow up in Margaret and Arden Standish's home without being confident. Ember knew she was always valued and respected. Safe. Loved.

She'd come to trust that feeling.

That had been her great mistake.

Jace Xavier Picard had been her great mistake.

She tramped on a few more minutes, pulling her gaze away from the river to her left and peering into the woods on her right. She was getting close. She knew it.

The late Wayne Picard—known by most everyone in Harkness, New Brunswick, as Old Man Picard—had chosen to locate his camp way back in off the river. The same folk also knew that if they should find themselves at the mercy of the elements while hunting or hiking or fiddleheading, they were welcome to take temporary shelter there, as long as they left the place as they found it. To that end, there was always a spare key stashed in the Export Tobacco tin nailed to the wall of the shed out back. The trick of it was the cabin wasn't exactly easy to find. Constructed of logs, it was naturally camouflaged in amongst the trees—barely a corner of the building was visible from the river's edge. It was well off the beaten path, and that path wasn't very beaten to begin with.

A moment later, she spotted it. And caught her breath on an unexpectedly sharp pang.

Dammit! She'd had the better part of an hour to prepare herself to see him again. How could just the sight of the cabin get her heart pounding?

Forget that. How could the hurt feel so fresh after a freaking *decade*? She'd come back to Harkness dozens of times in the intervening years. Any pain she'd felt had become progressively more muted, time having layered the wound with protective scar tissue.

You never had to see him those other times. And you sure as hell never had to come out here.

That was it. The cabin itself. So many memories were attached to that place. Tender, hopeful, happy memories—all of them shattered by Jace's betrayal.

Ember swallowed. She would *not* let her mind go back there. She was not that starry eyed, head-over-heels young woman anymore. Bursting with trust? That was behind her. She was a doctor for pity sake! Had graduated in the top five percent of her class and had no less than a dozen offers on the table.

Her spirits buoyed at the thought. A hospital in Toronto was dangling a hefty signing bonus, though it didn't compare to what the brand new, state-of-the-art facility in Montana was offering. She hadn't ruled out Victoria or Calgary, either. Both of those offers were enticing, for different reasons.

Then there was Long Beach, California. Hannibal Thompson and Joanne Pine, a couple of med school buddies, were buying into Hannibal's parents' practice in the golden state, allowing them to scale back their activities. There was room for one more partner in the booming family and obstetrics practice that catered to the area's wealthiest clientele. Hannibal and Joanne wanted that one more partner to be Ember.

The buy-in was huge, but she could swing it. Part of her university ride had been on scholarship, which kept the student loans somewhat under control. But even with that debt load, banks were anxious to extend new, ridiculously large lines of credit in view of her future earning potential. And it wasn't like she had to come up with it all up front. Her friends were prepared to take part of it in instalment payments, over the next five years. She'd had a look at the practice's financial statements, of course. It would be a sound investment. More than sound. It would be positively lucrative. She couldn't think about it without hearing a *ka-ching* in her head.

No, she hadn't gone into medicine for the money, but after being a poor student for so long the prospect of making some was appealing. So was the idea of working with Hannibal and Joanne.

And California was thousands of miles away. A lifetime away from Harkness. A lifetime away from this river. Harkness Mountain. These memories.

Old Man Picard's damned camp.

She drew a deep breath and started toward the cabin.

What would her dad think about her relocating to California? Her brothers, Scott and Titus?

She'd been on the verge of raising the possibility earlier, as they'd sat together, munching on the world's best grilled cheese sandwiches. She'd yet to sign the contract—still had a week to mull it over—but she had pretty much decided. Telling her family would solidify the decision more than anything else would.

But just as she'd put down her sandwich and opened her mouth to ease into that discussion, the phone had rung and their dad had gone into the living room to answer it. Scott had taken the opportunity to grill Titus about whatever mysterious reason he had for calling the two of them home, but there'd been no time for that discussion either. Arden had returned to the kitchen with the search and rescue request.

Well, it wasn't an official search and rescue mission. The call had been from Faye Siliker, Ocean Siliker's mother. Mrs. Siliker thought her daughter might be up on Harkness Mountain and was worried enough to ask Arden to dispatch Titus to search for her. After what had happened to Ocean's best friend Lacey Douglas up there, Ember could understand Mrs. Siliker's concern. But at the same time, Ember knew Ocean. She was smart, resourceful. A Harkness girl. She'd be fine. And if she was up on the mountain in any kind of trouble, she'd be in good hands with Titus.

She grinned. Ocean had always had the biggest crush on Titus. Maybe this was the push her dim-witted brother needed. Maybe he'd be smart enough to ask her out.

What was it her father always said? *Some folks need a little push.*

But that wasn't the only call for Titus's assistance Arden had fielded. The pharmacist, Danny Parker, a long-time friend of her father's—had also called to ask a favor. Some fellow had sprained his ankle while hiking in the woods and managed to get himself to Old Man Picard's camp. From there, he'd used his cell phone to call the pharmacy for pain meds and a pressure bandage to treat the sprain. He'd further requested that the delivery person stop at his vehicle, grab his briefcase and hump it out to the cabin with the meds. Normally, Danny's teenage grandsons would have handled it, but both boys were out of town. Thus Danny had called Arden to ask Titus to do it.

Of course, once the call about Ocean came in, it took priority. A potentially lost hiker beat a courier mission every time. Titus, the strongest and most experienced of them, was a no-brainer for the potential mountain rescue job. That left Ember as the obvious choice for the sprain victim, given her medical training. But she'd had to fight for the privilege.

She bristled with the memory of the discussion that ensued when she announced she would deliver the supplies and treat the sprain. Her overprotective brothers hadn't liked that idea one bit. No way were they going to let their kid sister hike into the middle of nowhere to attend to some unknown guy.

Let her do it? Huh! No way were they going to stop her.

They'd still be arguing about it if their father hadn't stepped in to endorse Ember for the mission. Though if Titus and Scott had known who owned that sprained ankle, they might have bucked their father's decision. And frankly, if she'd known who it was, she might not have fought so hard for the job.

But when asked who the patient was, Arden had confessed that the name had slipped his mind. She'd been alarmed. *Something slipping Arden Standish's mind?* That was so unlike him. Immediately, she'd started fretting that that was why Titus had called her and Scott home. Was their father suffering from dementia? Early stages of Alzheimer's?

There'd been no time to talk about her father's health or anything else. She, Scott and Titus had headed out directly for the parking lot at the base of the mountain. There they'd found both the vehicle Ocean Siliker had been driving and the injured hiker's luxury SUV. Using the keyless entry code the pharmacist had relayed, Ember had retrieved the hiker's briefcase. It wasn't until she read the monogram on the case's brass plate as she was strapping it to her backpack that it dawned on her that it was Jace she was going to find in that cabin. Who else had the initials JXP?

She'd also realized instantly that there was nothing wrong with her father's memory. He'd conveniently "forgotten" the hiker's identity to give her one of those pushes he was so fond of.

Her face must have betrayed her, because her brothers had suddenly gotten keen for Scott to make the trek and Ember to wait in the truck. She'd vetoed that idea, reminding them their father had given the assignment to her because of her medical training. Sure, Scott knew first aid, but no one knew why the guy had twisted his ankle in the first place. Maybe he had an underlying medical condition that caused him to stumble or even faint, in which case it wouldn't be just a matter of icing down and wrapping a sprain. Besides, if Titus found Ocean injured, Scott was definitely the best option for backup. Not only was he physically stronger than Ember, he was a more experienced climber. Reluctantly, they'd had to agree.

She was less than fifty meters from the Picard camp when her cell buzzed. She stopped, pulled her phone from her sleeve pocket. A text from Scott.

Hey Kid.

She knew to keep the conversation short and sweet. Otherwise Scott would be grilling her on every step she'd taken, or was about to take.

Cabin's in sight. No worries. Then for good measure, she added, *Stop calling me Kid, Jerk.*

She slid the phone back into her pocket. Then, drawing a deep breath, she walked up to the cabin.

Warm yellow light spilled out from the small front window.

Despite herself, her heart fluttered in her chest. She'd placed a light in that very window once herself, a long, long time ago. But it had been a candle, one tiny flame. Not this bright, electric light...

She shook her head—and the memories—away.

She was Ember Standish, M.D. All grown up, with *lots* of places to go. So much to do.

So over the past.

She was no longer in love with the captain of the high school boxing team—Coach O'Byrne's middleweight star. Carrying love notes in pencil cases, writing their initials—E&J—all over the place.

Three crows flew past, their cawing cries seeming to mock her. Then they were gone and there was nothing but the low whoosh of wind and distant murmur of the river. Ember dropped her pack at the door, glad to get the weight of it off her shoulders. She wanted to stretch her back before she knocked.

That and she wanted to compose herself before she walked in. Shake the long hike off, and slide into doctor mode. Objective, but not too detached. Professional.

She hefted her knapsack by the handle and knocked on the door. "Hello in there. It's Dr. Ember Standish. I'm here to help. Danny Parker sent me."

After a few heartbeats, she heard a flat, "Come in."

That voice. Low and velvety, it still made something quiver low in her belly. Thank God for the hour of forewarning! Otherwise she might have turned and fled.

Firming her lips, she opened the door and stepped inside.

The kitchen area was lit by the bulb over the sink, the one she'd seen from outside, but the other side of the cabin was dimmer. Not so dim, though, that she didn't spot him instantly. He sat on one end of a double recliner loveseat, his feet elevated.

Jace Picard. Her big mistake—the man she'd trusted.

She closed the door behind her, and walked toward him, her eyes adjusting as she went. The cut of his jaw, that black hair, so dark against his complexion. That well-muscled body. The piercing blue of his eyes. It was all so achingly familiar.

The look in his eye, on the other hand, was not so familiar. She'd never seen that kind of coldness in his face.

She was pretty sure it matched the iciness in her own.

“So it *is* you.” She dropped her bag on the floor. “You son of a bitch!”