

Promise Me the Stars
The Standish Clan, #3
A Hearts of Harkness Novel
by
Norah Wilson

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Chapter 1

SCOTT STANDISH looked at the clock on the wall behind the counter of the truck stop diner. Six twenty. He'd made pretty good time. In less than two hours, he'd be back in Harkness, New Brunswick.

It was a cold, dark, late-October morning, but even at this early hour, he was just one of many patrons. Hands wrapped around a steaming coffee, he leaned over his now empty plate. He'd just finished putting away trucker-sized portions of fried eggs, sausage, home fries and toast. But he'd eaten it because his body needed the fuel, not because he was particularly hungry. Every damned bite had stuck in his throat.

What a crazy few days it had been.

At his brother's behest, he'd gone home for the Thanksgiving weekend, and ended up staying more than a week beyond that. He'd known something was up when Titus had insisted both he and their sister Ember come home for the holiday. He just hadn't known what. Turned out Titus didn't either. At least not all of it.

Scott balled his paper napkin up and dropped it onto the plate.

The homestead stuff wasn't the only reason that breakfast of champions now felt like lead in his gut.

"More coffee, Sunshine?"

It took him a moment to realize the waitress—a tiny woman who couldn't have been more than a year out of high school—was speaking to him. The nametag on her pale yellow uniform read *Madonna*, and the hot black coffee waved lazily against the sides of the pot as she swirled it invitingly. He smiled. *Sunshine*? At 28 he was old enough to be Madonna's father. Okay, maybe an older brother. And he sure as hell didn't feel like any kind of sunshine. Especially after yesterday.

"Can I have it to go? Black. And I'll take the bill too, please."

With a snap of pen across the order pad, she handed him the bill, then hustled off to get his coffee for the road. When she returned less than a minute later with his double-cupped joe, he stood and handed her a twenty, waving off the change.

“Wow, thanks.”

He knew from Duchess at the diner in Harkness how hard servers worked. And in a rough place like this, he could imagine some of the crap these waitresses had to put up with. Of course, if he ever tried to over-tip Duchess, she'd likely cuff the back of his head. The thought made him smile. “Thanks for the excellent service.”

“Have a good day,” she called after him as he headed out the door.

Early as it was, the gas pumps were already busy. As he trudged past them, he noticed a display of ice scrapers and snow brushes. They'd soon be in demand. He pulled his jacket closer against the chill as he rounded the building to the parking lot where he'd left Titus's old truck. Two men walked toward the diner, passing a cigarette between them. The air was suddenly pungent as Scott passed them.

Weed.

He was pretty sure that was the least of the drugs that could be found back here. To his left the big trucks parked, the eighteen wheelers. Easy place for an enterprising drug dealer to ply his trade. Drug testing generally kept drivers for the major trucking companies clean, but there would always be drivers working for small companies who didn't employ drug-testing. Having done some short-haul trucking himself, Scott knew some of the latter group would be on their CBs right now, looking for “Lucille”. Lucille being the speed or cocaine they wanted to score to help them stay awake longer, or maybe weed to help them unwind and sleep.

He didn't partake himself. Hell, he barely even drank. None of the Standish men were regular drinkers. Although he, Titus and Uncle Arden had tipped a few back the other night. He smiled at the memory.

Scott had left Montreal at eleven o'clock at night, Eastern Time, partly to avoid the traffic he knew he'd encounter if he left the congested city in daylight, and partly because he couldn't stay there another night. Naturally, he'd tell Titus he'd left considerably earlier. Yeah, he'd gotten that whole *not a click over the speed limit* lecture from his brother, and to a lesser extent, from his uncle. But on the Trans-Canada Highway, the old pickup had practically *begged* to be let off leash.

Well, who was he to refuse such a fine old vehicle?

It wasn't like he was in Titus's baby, the new F-250 Super Duty. And strange at it seemed, he swore he could almost feel a kinship with that old truck. Feel the need for speed, the need to break out and run, just to prove it could.

Reaching the truck, he noticed the tarp he'd used to wrap the load—motorcycle parts Titus had asked him to pick up—had come untucked. He flipped it up, checked that the boxes were still there, then tucked it back into place. The lot had security cameras, but one never knew.

Load secured, he climbed in behind the wheel and keyed the ignition. The faithful old truck roared to life, but instead of pulling away, Scott scanned the radio channels. He'd been listening to rock music most of the way home, but the signal had been getting increasingly fuzzy. Now, as he cruised through the stations, he hit upon a piece of classical music. The only "classic" he knew was classic rock, but this piece was...nice. Soothing. Just for a moment, he closed his eyes.

For a few precious seconds his mind was clear, at ease. Sleepy. But then it was once again on *her*. April Morgan. The woman he'd left behind. The one he'd never see again.

Dammit, his leaving had hurt her. He'd seen it in her eyes, right there behind the determination not to show it.

Christ, it wasn't like they were lovers or anything. They'd both been clear about that from the start. Montreal was a temporary stop for him. Like every other place had been. Every place he ever would be.

Then there was April's daughter, Sidney. Or Sid the Kid, as Scott called her. He'd spent nearly every day of the school summer vacation with her at his side. And when school started up again, that bright ten year old still managed to wriggle out of it from time to time. And when she *did* have school, she'd race from the bus to find him. She'd watched as he'd worked around the Boisvert mansion. She was curious, bright, full of questions. Questions he'd found himself looking forward to answering, or trying to answer. Until she'd asked about the stars.

How do you know the stars will come back? I see them at night, but they're gone in the morning. What if...what if sometime they just go away forever?

But they don't go away at all, he'd explained. Not really. You just can't see them during the day.

What if you're wrong, Scott?

He hadn't known how to answer.

Thunk.

His eyes flew open. What the hell was that? A soft but definite noise from the back of the truck.

He turned around in the seat and looked out through the back window. The tarp was still drawn taut over the load. Thank God. He hadn't drifted off. No one had ransacked Titus's parts while he dozed.

A couple passed between his truck and the Nissan Xterra on his passenger side, heading toward the diner. The mother had a toddler on her hip. When they got far enough away, he noticed they had two other kids in tow. Boisterous kids brandishing inflatable bats who ran ahead, whacking car fenders. The father caught up to them, confiscating the blow-up toys.

Mystery solved. One of them must have whacked the truck.

Wide awake now, Scott flipped back the tab on the plastic cup lid and took a cautious sip of his coffee. Then, with stars still dotting the dark sky above, he reversed out of his parking space and made his back onto the highway.

An hour and forty-five minutes later, Scott pulled into the yard. And as he always did, he breathed a little deeper. He looked over the straw-covered fields. Titus and Ocean had done a good job of getting things ready for winter. Scott would have been happy to help, but Ocean's mother Faye had suddenly needed a ton of work done at her house down the road. Some of those odd jobs could have waited, but Scott knew Faye just wanted to throw Titus and Ocean together alone. Apparently the strategy had worked. His brother and Ocean Siliker were now pretty much inseparable. It was just a matter of time before Titus popped the question.

Between Titus and Ocean and Ember and Jace, there was so damned much giddy happiness around, it was hard to take sometimes.

He got out of the truck and stood there a moment, his gaze going to the orchard now. They'd done a good job with it too, sanitizing the ground beneath the early-ripening trees, putting vole guards on the younger trees and such. But most of the trees were still heavy with fruit. The crop would be ready to pick soon.

The farm was his responsibility now, at least until after Christmas. He'd volunteered to stay on with Uncle Arden for a few months to give Titus a break. It was the least he could do after all the years Titus had put in. Except his brother hadn't left much for him to do. Thank God there

were repairs that needed doing to the old farmhouse. It would be hard enough to stay put here. He couldn't do it and be idle. He needed projects.

A movement to his left caught his eye. He turned to see Titus had come out of the old machine shed. Swinging both doors wide, he waved at Scott. "Might as well back it right in."

Of course. The motorcycle parts. Titus would be anxious to unload them. Probably anxious to check the old truck over, too.

Scott hopped behind the wheel again, drove over to the machine shed and backed the truck in.

"Keys?" Titus held his hand out.

Scott grinned and dropped them into Titus's waiting palm. "Good morning to you too."

Titus pocketed the keys. "I didn't expect you till early afternoon."

Scott stretched his back, then his arms. Damn. He'd driven from one end of this country to the other, and the long drives never usually bothered him. He was well used to the rambling life. But as he rubbed a hand over the back of his neck, he felt the tension in his muscles.

"I got an earlier start than planned."

Titus moved to the back of the truck and began untying one corner of the tarp. "How was the drive?"

"Beautiful. I love driving at night. Traffic was light, sky was clear."

"The highway between Edmundston and here?"

"Good. They seem to have filled a lot of potholes this past summer."

Titus nodded. "You must have been able to pick up some time there?"

Ah, yes. Fishing to see how hard he'd pushed the truck.

Knowing a non-answer would drive his brother crazy, he said, "Where's Uncle Arden?"

"Just hitting the shower now. He slept in this morning. First time in years."

Scott felt a chill. "Is he sick?"

"Nah. He was out late. Over at Faye Siliker's."

"Getting out of the house to give you two lovebirds some room, huh?." Scott opened the truck's door again and rescued his cup—less than an inch of cold coffee in the bottom of it.

Titus barely blushed, an indication he was getting used to this girlfriend thing. "Yeah, I think you're right. He goes over to Faye's a lot, but this is the first time he stayed out so late,"

Titus said. “It was almost midnight when Ocean and I got back to town. When I dropped her home, we found Dad and Faye sitting on Faye’s porch swing.”

“That’s not a bad thing.”

“Preaching to the choir, bro. After seeing Dad so depressed for all those years after Mom died, it’s great to see him finally doing things with a friend.”

Scott smiled, but it was for Titus’s benefit. All those years Titus had been stuck here, having put his chosen career on hold to take care of the farm and his parents. Meanwhile, Scott had bailed.

But didn’t he always?

“So what kept you out of town until midnight? Were you out on a search and rescue call?” He guessed not. In fact he guessed S&R had been the last thing on Titus’s mind when he’d come home so late.

“Nah. Haven’t been called out for weeks now.” He’d been working on the knots closest to the cab, but his hands stilled. “Ocean and I took a drive up to Rawdon Lake.”

“Would have been a beautiful night for it.”

Titus chuckled. “Did I mention I was with Ocean? Any night would have been a beautiful night for it.”

Scott grinned. It looked good on his brother, this love. And no one had been more surprised than Titus to find that the thing he was looking for was right here in Harkness.

Behind him, Scott heard the screen door on the house creek open, then bang shut.

A few seconds later...*woof ... woof!*

“Hey there, Axl,” Scott bent and patted his thigh in that *come-here* way. The geriatric mutt trotted up to him, tail waving. “Aren’t you looking chipper.”

“I’m giving him a new joint supplement along with the fish oil. Must be working.”

Scott bent to give the dog the good scratching he loved, but Axl ignored him. Moving to the back of the truck, the dog began sniffing, his head bobbing almost comically as he scented the air. Then Axl jumped his front paws up onto the tailgate and strained toward the tarp. He whined.

Clunk.

Scott’s adrenaline shot through the roof. Yeah, he’d definitely heard it this time. So had Titus by the way he was pulling the last few ties on the tarp.

Ember appeared around the corner. “Hi, Scott.”

“Stay back,” Titus commanded.

“What the—”

“Just wait by the door, Ember.”

Scott had no idea whether she obeyed Titus’s command or not. He couldn’t take his eyes off the truck. Shit! Had someone crawled under the tarp at the truck stop? Someone dangerous? He and Titus and a geriatric Axl could be the only things standing between some fugitive and their sister.

Dammit, why hadn’t he checked that noise out at the truck stop instead of assuming one of those kids had bopped his truck with their toy? How stupid could he be?

Pretty damned stupid, as it turned out.

Titus pulled the tarp away, then jumped back. “What the hell? A *stowaway*?”

Not just any stowaway. *Sidney Morgan*.

She sat up, shivering.

Ember elbowed her way between Scott and Titus to see for herself. “Oh my God, it’s a *kid*.” She was up on the truck, examining the little girl in a flash. “You poor thing. You’re freezing.” She looked up. “Titus, grab her. We need to get her in the house and warmed up.”

Scott stepped forward. “I’ll do it. She trusts me.”

Titus’s eyes widened even further. “You know her?”

Scott went to the side of the truck and lifted Sidney into his arms. She immediately snaked her arms around his neck and clung so tightly, she almost cut off his air supply. “I do.”

“Here, wrap her in this.” Ember held out a sleeping bag, the one Sid must have huddled in all the way from Montreal. “Now get her inside and I’ll see to her,” she said with the same doctor-in-charge voice.

He draped the sleeping bag around Sid’s trembling form and headed for the house.

Oh, Sid. What have you done?