

One

Everything suddenly became bloody confusing and downright frightening. The push that carried Pierce right off his feet surprised him. Not the lack of gravity, but the *feel* of it. But he wasn't able to relish the sensation for long before something went wrong. There was a strange clicking like the tapping of a telegraph machine all around him. He searched for the source until he realized it was coming from within his own mind.

What is this? A second later, the push forward switched to a pull backward.

He wasn't even sure if he was still holding onto Taisia. His gut told him no. The darkness soon left and what he saw next couldn't have been real. Below was the roof of a sizeable house with healthy green algae clinging to the shingles. He plunged through and into an area where he caught a glance at a contraption he scarcely recognized. Part of it swallowed him up and kept him locked in its glass chamber before he swirled round and round and traveled through a spiraling tube of sorts. It all happened so fast, there was no time to think, to question. His voice was no longer there, yet what good would it have done him?

After passing through the twisted pipe, he entered another chamber that was larger than the last, with an oval-shaped porthole above. There, lying on his back, Pierce saw himself. His hair was lengthy, and he sported a shabby beard and mustache, but it was clearly him. The bizarre viewing lasted seconds before he was pulled into his own form.

Bugger me!

The moment he rejoined his body, his insides were charged up. A beat of his heart, which followed many rapid knockings against his ribcage, and then blood flowed through his veins like newly formed streams.

Pierce Landcross took his first breath of life.

The air bloomed within his lungs. He gasped and his eyes snapped open. Things were blurry. He smacked his hands against the iron coffin he was trapped in, and then started beating his fist on the glass porthole. As he did, he felt his muscles working—the tendons shifting beneath his skin. His entire body was letting him know it was functional, even his pecker, which stood fully erect.

What was happening? Where was Taisia?

Tai, love. Where are you?

He started to panic. He banged with both fists on the porthole, aiming to break it. His heart was now slamming against his sternum. He was on the brink of experiencing a nervous breakdown when the lid suddenly rose. Blurry figures stood over him. Someone gently pushed him down when he tried to sit up.

“Be still,” another person commanded soothingly.

It was a male voice, one Pierce somewhat recognized. A cloth, saturated in chloroform, was pressed against Pierce's face, and the hazy world flickered out.

“Dance my sorrowful . . . no. Hmmm. To my sorrowful love, dance the, erm . . . dammit.”

The mumbling from the unknown person was followed by the crumpling of paper. The sound of scratching came next.

Pierce took in a deep breath before touching his forehead. His body was no longer alerting him of its every movement. He wanted to believe it was a dream and that this was some strange passage his mind was taking him through as he was crossing over. Yet, he knew it wasn't. His instincts had warned him that something was terribly wrong as he was being yanked out of the In-Between. He hadn't been taken into another life; he had returned to his old one.

He blinked lazily, cleared his vision, and saw the wood framed ceiling above. He felt weak. Very weak. A horrible, stinging ache ran down the center of his chest. A linen bandage was wrapped around his upper torso and over the cause of the pain.

“She came to me like night comes after the day . . .? No.”

Pierce slowly rolled his head over to the person in the room with him. The man was sitting at a small table beside a window that allowed in bright sunlight, which made it difficult to see the fellow. The scratching Pierce heard earlier came from a quill the bloke was using to write with. Pierce threw the blanket and sheet off and eased himself up, swinging his legs over the side of the bed. His back faced the man. Pierce wore only bottom undergarments reaching near his knees. He no longer had a stiff dobber, and for that he was thankful. He again touched his chest.

“Christ. Was I cut open?” he asked himself softly.

“Stings, doesn't it?” the man spoke up.

Pierce gritted his teeth.

“How was it done? How did you bring me here?”

“Oh, it wasn't my doing, young fellow. I'm just as much of a victim as you are.”

Pierce knitted his eyebrows together and was about to turn to get an actual look at the cocker when another cocker entered.

Pierce gaped. “Dr. Duncan Hackett?”

He couldn't believe it, although he reckoned he should. After all, the doctor had admitted to him and Taisia that he was once a colleague to the late Professor Raphael Brooke, the old kook who claimed he could capture spirits from the afterlife.

“You told us you were Raphael's assistant,” Pierce began weakly. “You mentioned nothing about actually being able to bring people back from the dead.”

“Because during the time when you and I met, Mr. Landcross, I couldn't.”

Pierce's jaw dropped when he heard the man say his real surname. Even though Pierce considered Duncan a mate, he'd never disclosed who he and Taisia really were.

“Let me spare you the breath in asking,” Duncan snorted. “I discovered your true

identity shortly after Chief Ailani's death. You and your whole family attended the wake and funeral, remember? I simply snuck into your home and did a bit of investigating. To be honest, I hadn't the foggiest idea what I would find, but I had a strong suspicion about you, Mr. Landcross, and when I saw your photographs in your bedroom and the series of books on the shelf, I realized who it was that I had befriended."

The books Duncan was referring to were the entire set of *The Adventures of Pierce Landcross*, written by Clover Norwich, who had used the pen name Jessamine Fairchild. They were on a bookshelf inside the living room with dozens of other tomes when Duncan discovered them. Bloody hell, if he had gone into his house, then he must have snooped through his old luggage trunk where Pierce kept his black dapper coat and Oak Leaf pistol. Items he was known to have.

Duncan remained standing at the threshold with hands clasped behind him. He wore a white shirt, an ascot, wool britches, and a red vest. He was twenty-two years younger than Pierce, yet the grey in his light brown hair and thick muttonchops was coming in. He had a plain face, strong chin, a narrow nose, and dark, aggressive eyes.

"Why did you do this?" Pierce demanded with as much force as he could muster.

"Why shall the fly catch the eye of the spider that aims to devour its body?" the man by the window broke in.

Pierce twisted around, ready to tell him to stow it, when the sight of the bloke nearly caused him to fall right off the bloody bed.

"Edgar Allan Poe?" Pierce gasped.

The poet had a litter of crumpled up paper balls surrounding a short stack of sheets on the table. He wore a black suit, and his notable face was unsmiling and his eyes sulky. Pierce recognized him from the daguerreotypes he'd seen of him. He looked to be in his early forties, with dark hair and a mustache.

Poe only stared at Pierce with those sad peepers of his before saying drily, "I think I finally have the first suitable opening line to my new poem."

He began writing again, the tip of his quill scratching the paper.

"Mr. Poe was stationed in here so to inform me when you woke up," Duncan explained, pointing to the button on the wall that rang the servant bell.

"Aside from you, Mr. Landcross, Mr. Poe is the latest addition to my collection."

"Collection?" Pierce noticed a standing mirror in the corner.

"Indeed," said Duncan as Pierce slowly stood and approached the mirror. "There are others."

Pierce studied his reflection. Other than the shaggy beard and mustache, he appeared to be his youthful self again. Perhaps a touch older than he let himself be in the In-Between. Because he had always appeared younger than he was, he had no idea how old he was supposed to be now. Late twenties, early thirties? His busted leg seemed to be in good working order, although there was a queer feeling to it, along with his hands and feet. His green eyes were just as bright and lively as ever before, and his smooth skin had no signs of wrinkles or age spots, and there were no grey strands in his multi-colored hair,

which was also very long and shabby. In his previous life, he'd been often told he was a very handsome man—beautiful, even. Such gifts had been restored, it seemed. The scar across his throat, given to him by his older brother, Joaquin, and the branded figure-eight, along with the mark where he'd been stabbed, were thankfully not included.

“Others?” he questioned. “How did you do this, Duncan?”

The bastard grinned at him.

“Allow me to show you.”