

Chapter Four

The Hiccup

Pierce waited in the lodge, wearing the fuzzy black bearskin cap down low. He stood with his spine arrow straight, head held high. He hoped that by having pulled back his hair and keeping the scar across his neck well hidden under the high, stiff collar, along with the assistance of the dimly lit atmosphere, it would be enough to conceal who he really was.

A door squeaked open and in walked a short man wearing dirty clothes. His shaggy muttonchops and thinning hair made him appear like a bloody leprechaun on a bender. He also reeked of onions.

“I’m the sheriff here. What’s this about, eh?” he demanded irritably.

“Sir,” Pierce began in his best assertive tone. “I am Sergeant Crispin Gales. I am on official business. I was requested by the Queen to interrogate the Landcross couple.”

The sheriff sized Pierce up, causing a shudder to race up his spine. He worried less about being noticed and more about his uniform being recognized as a Foot Guard’s uniform. Despite Clover’s claim that everyone working at Newgate wouldn’t be able to tell the difference, the warden, however, might not be so easily fooled.

Then the scruffy cocker huffed and crossed his arms. “Them again? They have already been questioned.”

Ooh, Pierce loved it when the lass was right.

“Yes, but Pierce Landcross has yet to be brought in. We need more information to assist us in finding the fugitive.”

Pierce reached into the uniform’s breast pocket for the rolled-up note and handed it to him. “Here is a letter from Her Highness.”

The little troll stepped over and took it from him. Even though Pierce wasn’t concerned he would spy a forgery, for he highly doubted the man had ever seen the Queen’s handwriting before, he worried about the letter not being stamped with the Royal Seal. Regardless, the warden appeared to overlook it as he unrolled the paper. The letter consisted of an order to allow Sergeant Crispin Gales to interrogate the prisoners about the whereabouts of their son. The warden read it, or, at least, pretended to read it. The royal letterhead was likely what persuaded him to cooperate. He lowered the sheet and looked at Pierce.

“I don’t know what you hope to gain, Sergeant, but very well.”

Pierce didn’t thank him, but, instead, demanded, “And I shall need to speak to them privately, preferably in your office quarters.”

The sheriff jerked his head back with his shaggy eyebrows knitted. His crooked mouth curled up in an unflattering snarl.

“*My* quarters? That is out of the question. The prisoners must be monitored when out

of their cells.”

“I’m more than capable of handling a pair of shackled, middle-aged rovers, sir. From experience, I have learned that when people are at ease while being questioned, they tend to offer more information. Without your keepers looming about, I might gain new insight. Understand?”

The twat seemed poised to protest when Pierce cut in with more weight in his tone. “If you disagree, please share your concerns with the Queen, who has personally sent me.”

Surprisingly enough, that wasn’t a lie.

The warden strained to keep his composure.

“That . . .” he started to say. “That won’t be necessary. Andrew,” he addressed the scrawny turnkey with a short club hanging from his belt. “Go fetch the Landcross lot and bring them to my quarters.”

“Aye, sir.”

When the turnkey left, the sheriff gestured Pierce on. “This way.”

* * *

“You have dead?” Fan demanded in deliberate broken English to the guardsman stationed at the prison entrance where Pierce had gone.

“What?”

“Dead,” she repeated. “Any deceased prisoners in there?”

“Yeah. We’ve had some who died yesterday.”

Fan clambered off the wagon. “No, no, no, no. We need fresh dead. Only fresh will do.”

The guard backed away some, obviously disturbed by the conversation, as well as Fan’s approach. Fan stopped and reached into her pocket.

“I work for physician who studies bodies for medical purposes.”

The guard’s stiff body slackened a bit.

“Oh. I understand. Are you an assistant?”

Fan was relieved the guardsman had dealt with this sort of thing before. He would be more interested in the amount she was willing to offer rather than telling her to piss off.

She quickly pulled a coin purse from her pocket. “I am only collector. You see this?”

She reached in and brought out a handful of gold coins. Fan couldn’t be sure in the dim light of the single lantern, but it appeared the guard was drooling.

“This yours if you inform me about any recent dead. Bring them to me. The physician I work for is desperate. Needs bodies very badly. Man, woman, or both.”

She dropped the coins back into the sack, save for one sovereign, which she held up as she walked toward him. “We take break at the pub down the road,” Fan notified as she placed the coin in his palm. “You tell us, yes?”

The hungry look on his face answered that question. “Absolutely. Bobby is your man.”

Fan smiled at Bobby and turned to Bartłomiej, seated on the cart, holding the reins. She climbed up and sat down beside him. With a click of his tongue, the wagon headed slowly

down toward the pub at the end of the road.

* * *

Pierce's palms were damp with sweat. Not only was he standing inside one of the most dreaded places in Great Britain, but he was also about to be reunited with the people he believed he'd never lay eyes on again. Ever since he and Joaquin were separated from his parents as children, he'd held out hope a reunion was on the horizon. The chance that it wasn't them at all had crossed his mind more times than he could count. If it wasn't for Darius's precise description, he might not have come this far.

He breathed deeply and slowly, trying to calm the fluttering in his stomach. In times of stress, Pierce usually paced around, but he stayed seated in front of the warden's desk, keeping his little nervous tells in check. The sheriff, who seemed more or less bored, sat in his chair, picking dirt and whatever else from under his long, broken fingernails with the tip of a rusty boot knife. Pierce thought he was about to go mad when a knock finally came behind him.

"Come," the warden ordered.

A creak sounded and Andrew, the turnkey, entered. "I brought the prisoners, sir."

Pierce stood and held himself like a military soldier.

"Let them in," the warden commanded, also standing.

The turnkey shifted sideways and said, "Go on. Move."

The scraping of chains echoed before anyone appeared. A shackled man stepped in first. A woman followed. Pierce recognized them immediately.

Before his emotions got the better of him, Pierce faced the warden. "Thank you, sir. I shall call when I'm done with them."

He switched his focus on his parents and gestured with his arm for them to move farther into the office. As his mother passed, she stole a glance at him. Her eyes flickered.

"I insist the door stay open," the warden disputed, coming around the desk.

Pierce placed a hand on the warden's shoulder and led him out with the turnkey.

"This is a delicate matter, sir. One that ought to be handled with care. I'm sure you understand."

"Yes, but . . . but . . ." the sheriff stuttered as Pierce closed the door in his face.

"It'll only be a moment," he promised, stepping away in the hopes the warden wouldn't re-enter and argue more.

As Pierce passed his parents, he whispered, "We need to hurry."

"Excuse me?" said his father. "Hurry for what reason, sir?"

Pierce halted and took in a long breath before turning to face them.

"This may be a tad much to absorb, and we don't have the tick-tocks for it all to sink in, but I'm . . ."

"Pierce," his mother said.

Nona Landcross had recognized her son the moment her green eyes met his.

“Ello, Mum.”

Her face brightened, and the entire room glowed. Before her voice rose with excitement, he shushed her. “Quiet now.”

His dad looked at him, bemused. “Is it really you, son?”

Pierce offered a smile. “It is, Dad.”

This wasn’t the family reunion Pierce envisioned. He imagined finding them in a wide-open field somewhere, free, happy, and with the rest of the troupe. Not shackled like animals in some halfwit’s office quarters.

“We ought to hold off on the hugs and kisses,” he advised. “I’m here to break you out.”

“Eh?” his father said.

Pierce brought two devices out from the breast pocket of his vest, which he still wore underneath the uniform. He handed one over to his father.

“Take these and hide them. Are you both held in the same cell?”

“*Oui*,” his mother answered.

“Good, then one should suffice.”

“What are they?” his dad wondered.

“They’re dispensers.”

“Dispensers?” he asked, looking at it more closely. “What’s in them?” He sniffed. “It smells odd.”

The dispensers were copper-made things, the size and shape of an ink jar. Each gadget had tiny holes dotting the top of them. A tiny switch was located on the side near the base with a miniature voltaic pile battery fastened behind them. Both batteries had little wires connected to heating coils tucked away under the stand.

“They’re filled with a special sort of hallucinogenic plant called *Salvia divinorum*. When made into a liquid form, *Salvia* becomes a very effective psychoactive. Look here.” He flipped the dispenser he held upside down to show the heating coils on the bottom. “It’s electric. Flick the switch to power them. They will act the same as a small boiler, releasing the chemical into the air in a mist when the pressure mounts.”

“You’ve done this before?” Nona asked, accepting the dispenser he offered her.

“Not with these. In the old days, we used to burn cloth dipped in *Salvia*.”

Fan had instructed him on how to use the dispensers before they left for the prison. The devices were designed to turn water into steam in order to help with nasal congestion. The liquid was stored inside high-grade steel containers within the dispenser. When the liquid boiled it sent vapors through a tube running up the short neck of the device. Fan promised the result would be far more effective than the old way.

His father was utterly fascinated by this. “What happens after the *Salvia* is released?”

Pierce reached under his uniform and brought out a small jar from the same breast pocket. “Then the real magic begins. You have cellmates, I reckon?”

They nodded.

“Fantastic. When you return to your cell, find a safe place to switch the dispensers on. The pressure inside will build quickly. When the chemical is released into the air, that’s

when you start talking about killing yourselves. Claim you both are going to drink the poison you smuggled in. Be convincing, and make sure people hear you.”

He dipped his fingers into the jar. “Hold still,” he ordered as he smudged clear oil under their noses.

“What did you put on us?” Jasper demanded.

“It’s anise oil. It’ll block the smell of the chemical and prevent you from being affected by it, keeping your heads clear.”

“And this chemical will have everyone else believing we’re dead?”

“If you plant it into their heads—and I mean, make a *show* of it—they will truly believe you’ve done yourselves in. Most likely, someone will call for the keepers. Once the guards breathe in the chemical and listen to what the prisoners are telling them, they’ll also fall under the same illusion.”

Pierce spoke fast, knowing that at any given moment, the impatient warden could come bursting in.

His father studied the dispenser curiously. “What will happen then?”

“I have someone outside who is going to pay to have your bodies released to her. She’s staging herself as a collector working for a physician needing cadavers. She’ll bring you both to safety. Just keep pretending you’re dead until she tells you it’s safe. I’ll meet you on the next road over. Got it?”

“*Oui.*”

“Aye.”

“Right,” Pierce said. “Let’s get on with it.”

“What about Taisia?” Jasper added.

That stumped Pierce on the spot. “Who?”

“Taisia. She was arrested with us.”

An extra person was not expected.

“Erm . . .” Pierce began, unable to think of what to do. “How unfortunate for her?”

“*Non!*” Nona snapped angrily in French. “She must come with us! Do you understand me, young man?”

Pierce narrowed his eyes and retorted back in French, “She cannot. I had not planned for this. Do *you* understand?”

To that response, his father hissed.

Nona Landcross quickly reminded Pierce of who was in charge in this family when she growled, “Then you best find a way to *break* her out, too, or we do not go.”

Her tone made him feel like a five-year-old youngster again. He crumbled under the pressure.

“I . . . I,” he stammered. “Fine. Give me the dispenser.”

His mother handed hers over. Pierce tucked it back underneath his vest.

“I’ll take care of it. Now, start crying, Mum. Both of you. I need you to look very upset because you’ve given out critical information about your son.”

“Aye, we can do that,” his father assured him.

His folks had always been top-notch performers. A wanderer needed to be, if they wanted to eat.

Without much effort, his mum burst into tears and wailed loudly. Her husband took her by the arms, pretending to hold her upright. The door hinges creaked, and Pierce got into character.

“Get them out of my sight,” he ordered Andrew.

The dirty man led them out. The warden entered and looked at the prisoners with confusion.

“What happened? Did they say anything?”

“Yes. But not enough. They informed me a young woman was arrested with them. I shall need to speak to her, as well. Have her brought to me.”

The warden’s face soured. It was a nasty sight to behold.

“I believe I’ve been more than cooperative, sir.”

“That you have, my good man. Now, I ask for a little more cooperation. Go fetch her for questioning.”

The wee gnome huffed, “Andrew, hold up.”

“Aye, sir,” the turnkey said from the other room.

To Pierce, the sheriff said, “You may question her if you believe it will help find that swine, Pierce Landcross.”

Oink! Oink! You, ugly tosser.

“But you’ll have to go to her.”

Clearly, the man did not enjoy having his space invaded. Pierce didn’t want to argue and risk creating a scene. So far, everything was ticking along like clockwork, and although this other person was unexpected, he had confidence he could handle it.

“That will be fine,” Pierce agreed.

The sheriff turned to Andrew. “Bring the sergeant to the young woman’s cell while you return the Landcross lot to theirs.”

“Aye, sir,” Andrew said, then looked to Pierce. “This way, Sergeant.”

“Wait,” commanded the warden, holding out his hand.

When he did, Pierce’s heart wedged up into his throat.

“I must acquire your firearm, Sergeant. We don’t allow guns inside. Safety precautions, you understand?”

Pierce really didn’t fancy the idea of going in unarmed. If things went awry, he’d be left vulnerable. He couldn’t protest and risk any unwanted attention, however. Reluctantly, he unholstered his Oak Leaf revolver and handed it over.

“Of course. After all, safety is key.”

The warden curled his dirty fingers around the pistol’s handle. “Indeed. Good luck, Sergeant.”

Pierce sucked in a breath and followed the grimy turnkey into the filthy guts of Newgate Prison. He couldn’t help but to be reminded of how he could’ve ended up in here himself. When he was sentenced to a penal colony in Australia, he was held in Dartmoor Prison,

down near Plymouth where he was arrested. As he trailed after the turnkey through the long, dark, and dank hallway, Pierce was thankful he never had the pleasure of being imprisoned in this place.

After going through one locked gate after another, they entered a large cell area where many miserable sounds emerged from the shadows. Coughing, crying, painful moans, and desperate prayers. A queasy feeling twisted in Pierce's stomach when a babe wailed. A handrail stood off to the right that overlooked the dark aisle below where more cells were lined up directly underneath the cells of the second-floor. A staircase by the gate led down to it. In the center of the second-floor cellblock, Andrew stopped and unlocked a cell door.

"Move it, you Gypsy swine," he ordered Nona and Jasper.

His mother entered first, and as his father followed behind her, the turnkey shoved him forward. "Hurry up!"

It took everything Pierce had to keep from attacking the scrawny dolt. The dirty man slammed the iron door hard, no doubt to awaken the fortunate prisoners who were able to fall asleep.

With a sharp click of the lock, Andrew said to Pierce, "Follow me."

Pierce was so inflamed, the cold no longer affected him.

"Lead on," he growled through his teeth.

He glanced over to his folks. They were staring longingly at him. He secretly gave them a thumbs-up as he moved on. He hoped the sight of his parents behind those cold bars would not be the last image he'd ever have of them. He followed the scrawny turnkey through the entire cellblock and arrived at a gate, guarded by another keeper. This man sat on a stool beside some sort of lever.

Pierce pointed to it as the turnkey put the key into the lock. "What does the lever do?"

"It's part of our new installations," he answered. "When pulled, it opens all the cell doors on this floor at once. There's another lever down yonder next to the gate we came in through that opens the ones down on the bottom floor."

They had entered another section of the prison when Pierce asked, "Why is the woman not held in the same cellblock?"

"She was with them other two vagrants, but we've put the likes of her in a private cell."

"Why?"

"The arresting officer—a Lieutenant Javan, I believe his name was—thought it best, seeing how she's the only one here that, erm . . ."

"What?" Pierce demanded.

The turnkey stopped at the base of a staircase and turned to him. "Let's just say she has a healthier looking complexion than any of us do. Some prisoners are made uneasy by it."

What he said confused Pierce greatly. He decided to hold off on any questions about it and simply went up the stairs. They reached a short hallway where six cells, three on each side, lined the walls. Lit gas-powered lanterns hung low from the ceiling.

Pierce followed the turnkey to a cell located at the very end. When they came to it, the skinny arsehole called out, "Oi! Bitch! Up on your feet. You have a visitor."

Pierce stepped beside him and saw only darkness inside the cage. No one seemed to be inside.

“Oi!” the turnkey shouted, banging on the bars with his short club. “Get up, you lazy slut!” When no response came, he pulled his keys. “She’s hard-headed, this one. Doesn’t like to mind.” He jabbed the key into the lock. “Sometimes we have to put pressure on these sorts.”

“Using violence isn’t necessary,” Pierce said, concerned by the man’s intent.

“Oh, but it is, sir,” he argued with a wicked, half-crazed grin.

There was no talking the bastard out of it. Beating the lass would certainly hinder her performance, which he needed in order to convince the guards she was dead. Pierce had to alter the plan and hope for the best.

The moment the lock clicked, the turnkey marched inside past a pile of hay in the corner. Pierce quickly followed.

“May I?” he asked, reaching for the club.

The wanker looked at him and grinned again.

“Be my guest, Sergeant.” He handed the short club over. “Be a real treat to witness a military man in action, it would.”

The moment Pierce held the club, he whacked the turnkey over the head as hard as he could. The impact floored him. The anger Pierce already had toward him for shoving his father had not worked in the turnkey’s favor. Just out of spite, Pierce belted him once more.

Tosser will be out cold for a while.

He looked into the darkness where the bed was barely in reach of the lamplight outside. He reckoned she was hiding behind the headboard.

“Oi, lass. Come on out, eh?”

He heard rustling coming from the hay pile behind him. He craned his neck, only to be struck across the temple. The force whirled him around, knocking the bearskin cap off, and sent him down to his knee. And just as he had done with Andrew, the attacker boxed him a second time right in the forehead, sending Pierce flat on his back. He caught a flash of his attacker, a dark-skinned woman—the one he’d come to save, he reckoned. She dropped her weapon, snatched the club, and grabbed the keys from the turnkey, as well as pulled off his coat and took his hat. She acted so fast she was merely a blur to him. The hits didn’t help to get him moving quickly. The sharp head pain that throbbed madly, messed up his eyesight, and by the time the world came back into focus, she was already out of the cell.

“Wait a tick,” he mumbled, struggling to clamber to his feet.

The cell door closed and locked. The click got Pierce on his feet faster.

“No! Wait! You don’t understand!”

The prisoner had vanished down the stairs by the time he reached the bars.

“Bugger,” he muttered.

