

Chapter Eighteen

Don't Believe It

Taisia's moans grew louder, causing Pierce's passion to rise. Pierce sat against a tree with her moving over him, her nails clutching his shoulders. The rough bark scratched against his bare back. He didn't mind, for he had her beautiful body to look at and touch.

How fortunate he was to have found her, this intelligent, brave, headstrong woman. Every minute with her gave him a sense of peace and contentment. Each time they made love, it was the best he had ever experienced.

Being with her in this moment was no different.

Her moans increased. The fog of her breath thickened and her fingers dug deeper into him. She was about to reach her peak, and that excited him enough to bring him to his own crowing point. His hold on her hips tightened and he grunted through his teeth as he climaxed. The blissful rush, the sound of her pleasurable cry as she crested right along with him, was overwhelmingly intense.

As their apex surge subsided, it left him quivering. He raised his eyes to her and saw her staring at him. The glow of the surviving candles inside the hanging bottles radiated off her dark skin. Her eyes spoke of satisfaction and happiness, two sentiments he hoped always to give her. She brushed his sweat-drenched hair away from his face and ran her hand over his scalp, which tingled under her touch. He drew her toward him and kissed her passionately before he could even catch his breath.

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Hot blood rolled thickly from the deep wounds on Faolan's back. After so many years, he was being reminded of that terrible whip again.

The cat o' nine tails Coira used was the worst of her collection of whips. It had nine leather tails that slashed mercilessly through his skin. In the beginning, she would use it often whenever he rebelled. Another form of punishment she favored was fucking him and, just as he was about to reach climactic bliss, she'd order him not to, leaving him in regrettable agony. It wasn't until he began behaving that the whippings mostly stopped and he was allowed his release when she took him.

Coira MacCrum had put him through so much anguish in such a short period of time. He never would have thought it possible.

"Ye bastard!" she yelled. "What have ye been doin' behind me back?"

She gave him no chance to answer before she lashed her whip. His torn flesh made him wish for death.

"Nothing!" he cried.

He could no longer feel his hands. The leather straps binding his wrists had cut off his circulation. The straps were connected to chains that kept his arms suspended over his

head. Blood had poured down from his many wounds and had drenched his trousers. He'd need to get a new pair.

Coira snapped the bloody whip against the floor with a loud crack.

"Don't ye tell me nothing when Ruairi and Tavish saw ye with Franklin and his wife, who apparently ain't his wife."

"It's true," Tavish spoke up, standing amongst the throng being entertained by the torture. "They left together, and I watched Franklin's bonnie lass get proposed to by some another man." He smirked. "Those two soon went at it, they did. Quite the show."

"Ye know who these people really are, Faolan," Coira seethed. "And ye best start talkin'. I *order* it."

Faolan closed his eyes and dropped his head with a deep sigh. The sad truth was that she didn't need to use the whip to get him to talk. She just wanted to punish him first before starting her interrogation.

"Their real names are Taisia, Joaquin, and . . . Pierce."

"Pierce?" she gasped out.

"Aye."

There was a pause.

"Joaquin. I know that name," Coira mused. "He's Pierce's brother?"

Faolan nodded. "Aye."

"I'll be," Andrew chimed in. "Do ye think it's Pierce Landcross, Madam MacCrum?"

"It must be," she said. "Let him down."

Andrew took the chain links off the spikes nailed in the wall and Faolan dropped to his knees, his bound wrists falling between them. He needed to untie his bonds himself. It was part of his punishment.

As he worked to loosen the thick leather knots, the tendons in his arms tightened like violin strings being wrenched straight. The hot sting nearly paralyzed him. Coira came around beside him. The strain in his neck almost kept him from lifting his chin up when she commanded him to look at her. He did so with strawberry-blond hair stuck to his sweat-soaked skin.

"I want ye to tell me everything. Describe Pierce to me. If it sounds like the Pierce I know, then I have a task for ye."

"What sort of task?"

Her wicked smile chilled him.

"If he has proposed to this Taisia, then that means he loves her very much, aye?"

Faolan knew exactly what she had in mind.

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Pierce wanted to stay at the grove with his fiancée, but he needed to return to the hotel and wait for Joaquin. If he couldn't get the canister, then Pierce would take some lock picking tools and open the blasted glass box himself. The faster Joaquin had the demon extract his poisonous blood, the sooner they could start their new lives—*all* of them.

Before they left the grove, Pierce disguised himself in his wig and beard. He also suggested Taisia go on ahead in order to keep from being seen together by one of Coira's cronies.

"I love you," he whispered fondly as he watched her ride away. "My wife-to-be."

Pierce eventually returned to his room, removed his disguise and gun belt, and waited a couple of hours for Joaquin before his exhaustion took him over. He had drifted off for a lousy moment when a frantic pounding got him stirring.

"Pierce!" Faolan called. "Pierce, are ye in there? Open up!"

With a heavy groan, Pierce rose to his full height and staggered blindly toward the door.

"Pierce!"

"Bloody hell," he grumbled, turning the lock. "Just wait a damn minute."

He swung the door open and was immediately greeted by Faolan's panicked face. "What is it?"

Faolan unexpectedly gripped both sides of Pierce's head. For a split second, Pierce resisted, then, oddly, surrendered to Faolan's firm grasp.

"Listen to me," Faolan ordered earnestly. "Taisia is in danger. Coira found her out and has her at Mary King's Close."

The exhaustion dissipated, allowing his terror to rush in.

"We need to get to your woman before she's killed," Faolan urged, letting go. "C'mon."

Pierce snatched his Oak Leaf pistol from its holster and bolted down the corridor. Fortunately, while waiting for Joaquin, Pierce had fallen asleep in full garb, boots and all. Faolan followed him outside and pointed to a horse nearby. "Over there."

Pierce rushed to the animal and mounted.

"Hold up," Faolan cried, hoisting himself into the saddle. "Ye'll need me help."

They rode to the entrance of Mary King's Close, where Pierce practically jumped off the horse and took off into the Underground. He shoved at anyone in his way on the narrow street. His feet moved so fast, it seemed as though they never touched the ground.

As he drew close to the market, the scream of a woman caught his attention.

"Help me!"

He hurried toward the shouting, frantically searching faces.

"Don't let them kill me! Help!" the woman cried in a Russian accent.

Faolan appeared next to Pierce. It was remarkable that the lad had kept up with him.

Faolan grabbed his arm and pointed at the chaos. "There!"

Pierce spotted the woman hurrying between the vendors. A pair of pursuers racing after her.

"It's Taisia!" Pierce shouted, taking up the chase.

Before he caught up, she vanished into an alleyway. The blokes chasing her went into another alley on the other side.

"Shite!" Pierce yelled. "They're going to try cutting her off!"

Pierce cut through the crowded market and eventually reached the alleyway. By then, she was nearing the end.

"Tai!" he shouted. "It's Pierce! Stop!"

She kept going and soon vanished around a corner. The muscles in his legs burned, as did his lungs. The moment he exited, he spotted Taisia running down the narrow street. He cupped his hands around his mouth as he ran.

“Taisia!”

She had to have heard him, and yet she kept running. What made matters worse was she was heading straight for her pursuers. He pulled his pistol from his waistband and tried catching up.

“There she is!” a gunman yelled as he and the other cocker exited the alleyway.

Taisia stopped, paralyzed with fear as the men raised their guns.

“No!” Pierce bellowed.

People scattered everywhere. Pierce never heard the shots, only saw the blood spraying out of her. She fell backwards. Pierce thumbed back the hammer of the revolver and took aim. The gunmen quickly turned on their heels and retreated down the alley. Pierce fired, but they were already gone. Pierce reached Taisia, dropped his weapon, and slid to his knees beside her.

“Taisia,” he said, lifting her.

Her breath was rapid and fear flashed like a lightning storm in her eyes. When she looked at Pierce, her eyebrows knitted together as though she was confused.

“Tai,” Pierce whispered soothingly. “Hey, it’s all right. I’m here.”

He avoided looking at the gunshot wounds to her chest and shoulder and the blood pouring from them. Instead, he touched Taisia’s face and stared deeply into her eyes. Their brightness was fading.

“Hold me,” she requested.

He held her to him, breathing in her hair. The scent of it flooded his mind with every memory of her. Blood, warm and thick, seeped through his vest and through his shirt. With a final sigh, she breathed against his neck one last time. Her quivering eased and she sagged in his embrace. His hold on her only tightened as she slipped away.

“Pierce,” Faolan said, kneeling beside him. “We must go, lad.”

He made no movement. He only wanted to stay on the sidewalk with her.

“Please,” Faolan pleaded. “I know somewhere ye can take her. Come.”

Grudgingly, Pierce raised his eyes. His vision was blurred with tears. He blinked and they rolled down his face. A throng had gathered.

With Taisia’s death, his wellbeing meant little. However, being arrested on false murder charges did not sit well with him. He doubted the so-called law—which had been bribed by Coira, or so Faolan had claimed—would do anything to stop her or her gang. That would leave him to take the fall.

“Follow me,” Faolan ordered, collecting Pierce’s gun from off the ground.

Pierce lifted his beloved and carried her down the dim street like a groom carrying his bride over the threshold. Faolan led him to a small chapel. Murmurs arose from the few parishioners inside as Pierce carried the body to the altar table. Faolan removed the candles, a cross, and the other religious paraphernalia. Pierce gently laid Taisia down as the priest, wearing a patch-worked robe, approached.

“What’s this now? What has happened to this lass?”

“Father,” Faolan said, placing his hand on the man’s shoulder, “might I have a word with ye?”

The cleric offered no resistance as Faolan led him away and toward the confession booths. What he spoke to him about, Pierce could not hear, nor did he care. His entire focus was on the bloody dead body of his beloved. Even in death, she radiated so much beauty and warmth. He took her hand tightly in both of his and pressed it against his tear-soaked cheek. His chest hurt from the shattered heart within. His breathing was very slow, for breathing—something that had once come so naturally—made his lungs feel as if they were full of heavy stones.

Everything he ever wanted had been taken. He and Taisia were supposed to wed, to have many beautiful children together, and to raise them under the sun with all of the love they had to offer. But now, Taisia was gone and his own future was lost to him.

Pierce shuddered as frigid air moved over him.

“What a shame,” came a voice beside him. “She was a beauty, indeed.”

Pierce slowly turned his attention to a very tall, dark-haired stranger standing at the end of the altar table, looking down at the body. He was a handsome gent with strange eyes that didn’t seem to want to settle on one color. He was dressed in a silk shirt, black vest, and a long, dark red coat with leather trimming. Not the sort who would occupy the Underground.

“She is beautiful,” Pierce stated softly. He narrowed his eyes. “Have we met before?”

He tipped his stovepipe top hat at Pierce and then nodded. His perfectly straight posture made him appear as tall as a giant. “Yes. But I highly doubt you care at the moment, do you?”

Pierce studied him a tad longer, trying to decide where and when they had crossed paths. He soon came to terms with the fact that he really didn’t give a toss.

“No,” he agreed, looking to his breathless Taisia. “S’pose I don’t.”

“I’m sensing you’re envisioning where you now stand in the greater scheme of things.”

“Am I?” Pierce said, again resting his cheek on Taisia’s hand. It was beginning to grow cold.

“You view your life as nothing but an empty vortex. Without her, there really isn’t anything left for you. Am I wrong?”

Pierce shut his eyes tight, letting loose a fresh stream of tears. The cruel truth cut him to the core.

“That is the problem with you mortals,” the stranger went on. “You let too much take hold of your emotions, and when something is lost or goes missing, it tears you to pieces. What do you plan on doing to end your life?”

Pierce already had an idea. “I thought I’d return to the Vaults, shoot my way to Coira, and go out in a hail of bullets.” His voice held little strength.

“Tsk. Typical. They’re expecting that. You’ll be cut down before you take anyone out, *especially* Coira.”

Pierce suspected the man was leading him somewhere.

“What are you suggesting?”

“You came here for Joaquin, did you not?”

Pierce knitted his eyebrows and turned to him. “How do you know that? Who are you?”

“At the moment . . . I’m the one telling you how to save your brother.”

Pierce had a feeling they’ve danced this jig before.

“If you wish to save him, then you must allow him to kill you.”

Pierce inhaled and held it in. “He won’t kill me.”

“He will if you let him. And once he does, he shall be free from the curse and become stronger and healthier than he has ever been.”

Pierce was about to tell him to kindly fuck off when the man added, “You can join your lover in the life that comes after.”

Pierce blinked. “What?”

“If you want to be reunited with her, as well as save your brother, then go to the Hellfire mansion.”

Pierce couldn’t look away from the swirling colors of the man’s irises. As strange as they were, he sensed no lie in what he was telling him. Could he actually save Joaquin by allowing his brother to kill him? Indeed, could Pierce be reunited with Taisia this very night? It all seemed promising.

“I have given you your choices,” the man said, again tipping his stovepipe top hat. “Goodnight.” He eyed Faolan nearby. “You’ve done very well.”

Faolan swallowed thickly and asked with forced bravado, “Are we still in agreement?”

“Do not interfere,” the cocker demanded.

Faolan bowed his head and stood in a petrified state as the tall stranger left down the aisle.

“Know him?” Pierce asked.

Faolan kept quiet until the chapel doors had closed.

“Aye,” he finally said with a deep, crestfallen sigh. “Don’t worry about it, though, eh? Listen, I’ve paid the priest to give her a proper burial in the Old Calton Burial Ground Cemetery. I even threw in some loot for a fine pine box. The funeral will be held tomorra.”

Pierce gently placed Taisia’s hand over her lifeless chest and crossed the other over it. He kissed her cheek tenderly for the last time and rose to his full height.

“Cheers, lad. See to it that the priest keeps his word, eh?”

Pierce spied his Oak Leaf revolver tucked under Faolan’s belt. He snatched it out and headed down the aisle.

“Wait, where are ye goin’?”

“I’m going home,” Pierce said, pushing open the chapel door.

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Pierce rode to the Old Waverley Hotel and banged on Joaquin’s door. No one answered. He went to his own chambers, ignoring the looks he received from guests who noticed the blood on him. Inside his room, Pierce wrote out a letter addressed to his brother in case he missed him at the mansion. He left it on the table beside a lit lantern. He slipped his gun from under his waistband, set it down next to his top hat, and left.

He rode out of the city as fast as his horse would go, passing only a carriage and a horseman, heading for the city, along the way.

When he arrived at the mansion, he asked the butler to show him to the chairman.

“*Che cosa?*” a short man groaned after a butler shook him awake.

“Milord,” the servant said. “This young lad is looking for Mr. Marsh.”

The man rubbed his eyes and sat up straighter in the chair he had been sleeping in inside the library. The strong smell of liquor was about him. The only light source came from the lantern the butler held and the pile of glowing embers in the fireplace.

“Mr. Marsh? He was just here with me.” He looked at his guest with confusion. “Who are you? Why are you looking for him?”

Pierce stepped in front of the servant and said, “I’m his brother.”