

Piper Pan & Her Merry Band



Book One: The Curse of the Neverland

by Lindy MacLaine

Thank you for joining Piper's Merry Band. As promised,
following are the opening chapters, free for your enjoyment!

**Be sure to visit my website or Facebook Page and enter the contest
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<http://www.thecurseofthenverland.com>

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The Curse of the Neverland

A Glimpse Ahead

“How long will it take to get to the Neverland?” Pip craned her neck to peer up at the elderly fairy hauling her by the belt loop. Heck, for all she knew, maybe it was her fairy godmother. Great, *great* fairy godmother, she thought.

“That depends on you.” The ancient pixie’s voice, strained with effort, shimmered through the chilly night air.

Second star to the right and straight on ‘til morning. The directions rang in Pip’s mind. She’d seen the play *Peter Pan* on stage so many times she practically knew the lines by heart. Her father had designed sets for more than one production and she’d watched rehearsal after rehearsal of her mother teaching swordplay.

Piper gulped. The memory both thrilled and threatened. She’d always hoped she’d get to the Neverland. But after her parents were stolen, she’d been afraid to think much about the magical place for fear something else bad would happen. The long-remembered image of the dragon-borne pirate ship framed against the full moon over the Space Needle had haunted her for five years. Now here she was on her eleventh birthday, if it could possibly be believed, sailing through the air toward the Neverland, butt-first.

PRELUDE

Royal Intervention: Some Time Earlier

Public declarations and courtly pronouncements had their place, but the real decisions in the fairy kingdom happened at teatime in the palace sunroom.

“If we do not take action soon, my queen” said King Oberon, sipping his Earl Grey tea from a porcelain cup, “the Neverland will collapse forevermore. Its loss shall be a blow to our magical realm.”

“And what, pray tell, do you suggest, my dear?” Queen Titania peered over her rhinestone-studded reading glasses at her husband, laying her newspaper aside. “You know as well as I, we’re bound by free will.”

The king of the fairies nabbed an extra piece of candied ginger and popped it into his mouth. “Free will, dung hill,” he said.

Titania raised a regal eyebrow. “Really, darling!”

“The fools have gone too far,” Oberon said. He raised a hand in acknowledgement. “I grant you, overt action is not the way. But nothing written says we cannot *lean*.”

The queen held his gaze. Her shoulders slumped a smidgeon. Her wings drooped. “’Tis true, ‘tis now or never,” she said. A moment more and she straightened, lifting her teacup in a salute. “Perhaps, my king, we shall lean. Just a bit.”

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“Good Morning, Belle, formerly Tinker Bell!”

Belle burrowed her head into her feather pillow, willing the regal wake-up call away. Why wouldn't they give it up? She hadn't gotten out of bed in two days.

All condo units in Fairyland's Crystal City came with the required portraits of the fairy king and queen. Belle hadn't realized when she moved in – how long ago? Was it months? Years? – That they talked. Daily.

“Good morning, good mo-orning!” the king sang. “It's great to stay up late, good morning, good morning, to you!”

“Nnngg,” Belle covered her ears and pulled her duvet over her head. She just couldn't see the point in getting up. Come to think of it, she hadn't seen much point in anything, lately.

“Belle, formerly of the Neverland, it's time for morning Tai Chi on the quad.” Queen Titania's voice was much harder to ignore.

Belle attempted to sit up, her old bones protesting. “Yes, Your Highnesses.” Gravity won, and she fell back into the warm cocoon of her four-poster bed. “Right away, Your Highnesses.” Surely they'd go bother someone else in a minute.

“If you do not wish to join the rest, at least do a sitting meditation here in your room,” said King Oberon.

“Don't coddle her, dear,” said the queen. “Belle, you'll begin upon on the count of three. If not, you shall know our wrath. One... Two...”

No help for it. She was going to have to move. With a monumental effort, Belle slid out of bed. She crumpled into a half-lotus on the plush carpet, her back propped against the bed frame. “All right, all right, I'm here,” she mumbled. The chilly morning air raised gooseflesh on her arms. Her ivory silk nightgown was all beauty and no warmth.

“Allow me,” said the king from his portrait. Merry flames filled the nearby fireplace. “An older fairy like yourself deserves to be waited on, am I not right?”

Belle bristled. It was true, she'd seen more years than she cared to count. If she'd remained ever young, as she had during her days with Peter Pan, it wouldn't matter. But since he'd left the Neverland, and since – well, that other thing, she knew she showed at least seventy years of her age. Still. No one had a right to point that out to a lady!

“Hmmm,” Belle managed. The warmth from the fire relaxed her. If she just closed her eyes and pretended to meditate, maybe she could sleep a little longer. Belle rested her hands in her lap, palms up, middle fingers touching thumbs, and took three deep breaths.

“Very good, Belle,” called the queen. “And thus it begins!”

Belle began sinking through gray layers in her mind. She'd pretend to meditate, and instead, have a little nap. Sliding toward sleep, she thought she heard the queen speak again, as though from a long way away.

“Do not lean too hard, my gentle king.”

The visions came fast and furious behind Belle's eyelids, with crystalline clarity. She stiffened, as if connected to an electric current. There was Peter, in all his youthful glory.

“Oh, Peter,” Belle sighed. “Why did you ever have to leave?”

The youth in her mind folded his arms in that know-it-all way of his, turned on his heel, and disappeared. Belle watched, as if through thick glass, as Peter took the hand of a smiling blonde girl. She was one in the long line of Spring Cleaning girls. That one was called Isabelle. Belle winced. She still couldn't believe Peter had left the Neverland to grow up with *her*. Just because the girl had been clever enough to tell Peter he was too “cowardly custard” to grow up, he'd had to go and prove her wrong. Irritation twisted in Belle's stomach.

In a flash, Peter and the girl were grown, dressed in wedding regalia, walking down the aisle. Peter looked so handsome in his tuxedo! He leaned in to give his bride one of those thimble-things with his lips. Belle squeezed her eyes tighter. She didn't want to watch Peter love someone else.

Before Belle could break this strange parade of visions, Peter aged. Strands of gray wove through his red-brown wavy hair. The bride on his arm wasn't his wife-to-be anymore; it was Peter's daughter, Angela, with brown wavy hair tumbling to her waist. He was giving her away in marriage to a dark-haired, dark-eyed, man. A tear rolled down Peter's cheek as he watched Angela say, "I do."

The scene shifted again. Peter was sitting behind the steering wheel of a car, windshield running thick with rain, wipers unable to keep up with the torrent.

"Look out, Peter!" a woman's voice cried. Belle didn't know if the voice was hers, or Isabelle's. Their screams wove together, shrilling as the headlights of a truck plowed straight into the car. Everything went dark. Belle didn't want to see any more.

It didn't seem to matter what Belle wanted. A wooded cemetery appeared. Peter's daughter, Angela, stood with her husband, their babe in his arms. Angela laid a bouquet of flowers at the base of two headstones.

"Mom, Dad," Angela said, her voice unsteady. "This is our daughter, your granddaughter. Her name is Piper. I wish you could have met her."

Belle felt tears streaming down her cheeks. Her heart hurt. Her breath came in hiccupping gasps. Again, before she could break away from the picture in her head, it changed.

Belle felt light, as a fairy ought to feel. She was sitting on the softest of clouds, looking down at her emerald green magical island. Her heart bumped, the ache now one of longing. The Neverland. Home. The sea sparkled in the sunlight. The mountain peaks glimmered white. There was Pirate's Cove, the Jolly Roger's sails fluttering in the breeze. She imagined she could see her pirate protégé, Captain Li'l Jack, standing at the helm, bellowing orders at his crew.

Belle's breathing slowed and her lips curved in a smile. It was all right. No matter what else had happened, the Neverland was there, comforting her, beckoning her.

But it wasn't all right. The scene mutated, like the edges of a burning letter. The island blackened. Trees stood, barren. Vegetation gave way to sand, and all signs of life disappeared. Fear stabbed at Belle's heart. Had the fairy Pearl been right all along? Had the enchantment become the Neverland's curse?

The image of Captain Li'l Jack filled Belle's mind. "I'll not stop 'til I have enough," he roared. His once-blonde hair and goatee had streaks of silver now, but his features were as handsome as ever. His blue eyes flashed, and he gripped the silver vial that he wore around his neck like jewelry, with both hook and claw. "I've almost enough to grow real hands." He held up his metal appendages, clearly imagining ten digits, whole and sound. Belle could feel his yearning, a force that threatened to crack her chest open.

Then it seemed to Belle he was looking straight at her, a snarl on his pretty face. "I don't care what promises I made, Belle. I'll feed the dragon the whole human race if necessary! Who needs you or yer blasted magical island?"

Belle's heart hammered as if the threat were imminent. Anger rolled through her and she longed to flail at him with her fists. But all she could do was watch.

Li'l Jack sent his First Mate, Flea, up the rigging with two lanterns, glowing red. Standing at the ship's prow, Li'l Jack shouted skyward. "'Tis time to hunt, me dragon!"

An enormous black beast appeared above the ship, eyes whirling red, powerful wings blocking the sky. Lightning cracked and thunder shook. The dragon arced into the cove, its bulk submerged in the dark, roiling waves. Breaking the surface with a roar, it coiled its massive body about the Jolly Roger. Mighty wings beating, it launched into the sky, bearing the pirate ship with it.

The image faded to black. Belle waited for more, but the movie playing in her head seemed to have finished. She used her fingers to peel her eyelids open, and looked around. She still sat, leaning against her bed, in her elegant beige condo in Fairyland's Crystal City.

Trembling with recognition of the truth, she rose, wobbling, to her feet. The fog that had surrounded her for weeks had lifted. She dressed and gathered a few things, moving more quickly and easily as she went.

Ready at last, she addressed the portraits. "Your Highnesses, I've got to go,"

"Oh?" The queen raised her eyebrow.

Belle narrowed her eyes. No one took that tone with her. "Yes. I have an heir to fetch," she snapped. "Peter Pan's granddaughter may be just a girl, but she's the only chance the Neverland's got." With that, Belle blinked twice and disappeared into thin air.

The king and queen looked at each other and smiled.

"How was that for a lean, my sweetest queen?" Oberon asked.

Titania's eyes twinkled. "'Twas subtle, and perfectly aimed," she said. "I could not have done it better had it been I."

"High praise indeed," said the king.

CHAPTER ONE

Fitch's Last Ditch Foster Home: The Morning of Piper's Eleventh Birthday

"Piper, meet your new foster mother, Mrs. Fitch."

Piper Pizzinni tried to smile. The lady wore a bathrobe and had curlers in her hair. Not a good sign, considering it was the middle of the afternoon on a gray Seattle Saturday.

"I'll leave you to get settled in, Piper." Miss Henning had been Piper's caseworker for the last five years, since her parents disappeared. She wasn't friendly, but at least she was familiar.

"Thanks, Miss Henning," Piper mumbled, watching her only stability walk away toward the official Child Protection Services vehicle parked at the curb. Piper gripped her small suitcase and stepped into the dingy house, ignoring her rising sense of panic.

"The girls here call this 'Fitch's Last Ditch Foster Home.'" Mrs. Fitch blocked her way, arms crossed and lips tight. "If you're here, it's because no one else will take you."

Piper resisted the urge to flinch under the hateful gaze. "It's nice of you to take me in," she lied. "I'm sure we'll get along just fine."

"We'll see about that." Mrs. Fitch turned on her heel and beckoned Piper to follow.

Piper climbed the stairs, keeping her distance from the swaying pink bathrobe. The woman wore enough perfume to offend a skunk. The carpet under Piper's feet was threadbare, the exposed wood below chipped and dirty.

“Hurry up!” As they reached the upper landing, Mrs. Fitch reached down and yanked Piper by the upper arm, pinching as she did so. Piper winced. She’d have a bruise, but she’d had worse.

“Down the hall to the left. You’ll meet the rest of the girls.”

Piper turned into the indicated doorway – a large bare room, each wall hosting a metal bunk bed. No bars on the window, but it felt like a prison cell. Piper shuddered. She counted seven girls, like planets in a solar system. It felt lonely in here, each girl in her own orbit, barely aware of the others. But all seven stopped what they were doing and stared at her.

“Girls, this is Piper,” Mrs. Fitch said. Piper held herself rigid as the woman stepped into the room behind her. “She’ll sleep in Sally’s bunk.” The sad excuse for a foster mother wheeled back out into the hallway, her voice lashing back. “I don’t want to hear from any of you until I call you down for supper.”

“Hi,” Piper said to the room in general, forcing a grin. Wrong choice. Six pairs of eyes narrowed at her. The seventh’s eyes widened, then burst into tears. Piper guessed that one was maybe three years old.

“Now look what you’ve done!” growled a pasty redheaded girl with freckles.

Piper shrugged. “Just trying to be friendly.”

“Give it a rest before you do any more damage,” the girl said. Her voice was as big as her body.

“How many foster girls does it take to change a light bulb?” Piper quipped. Surprise and puzzlement looked back at her. At least she’d managed to throw them off their game.

“I didn’t do, how bany?” A little runny-nosed stringy-haired blonde girl asked.

“That depends,” Piper said.

The redhead raised an eyebrow and looked menacing.

"It only takes one foster girl," Piper said hastily, "but it takes a whole caboodle of adults to tell her how to do it."

The blonde giggled and snorted. "Dat's fuddy," she said. She wiped her nose on the back of her sleeve. "I'b Stingky," she offered. "Dice to beet you."

"Huh," the redhead said. "Not bad." She looked at Piper grudgingly for a moment longer, and then relented. "Okay. We're the Lifers. You know, foster kids for life, get it?" She gave Piper a look that said if she didn't, she'd get a fist in the face.

"I get it," Piper said.

"Good." The redhead nodded. "I'm Pudge, I'm twelve. Zonker is the one who looks comatose over there. Zonk for short. She's eleven." Pudge gestured to a tall dark girl lying prone on one of the bottom bunks.

"Midge is the Samurai brainiac. She's nine." A girl all in black, wearing glasses, gave Pudge a dirty look from her top bunk. She glanced at Piper before leaning back over her book. Her long, shiny black hair swung like a curtain over her face.

"You just met Stinky," Pudge indicated the blonde, "she's seven." Next, she pointed at another top bunk. Twin girls, identical from their quirky half-smiles to their dark brown bowl-haircuts poked each other and giggled. "That's Flim and Flam." The girls in question weren't watching. Obviously what they were doing was far more interesting. "They're six," Pudge continued. "They speak Spanish most of the time, but don't let 'em fool you. They understand English just fine."

Pudge pointed to the smallest girl, whose cries had turned to hiccups, her thumb firmly planted in her mouth. "Thumb is four, even though she looks and acts like she's two." The little girl's long-lashed brown eyes crinkled in a smile, chocolate-brown cheeks dimpled, surprising Piper.

"Hello, there," Piper smiled back, this time for real.

In all the foster homes Piper had been in, there had never been other foster girls. She'd always been the family add-on who didn't measure up.

Friends. Piper barely allowed the word in her mind, flattening the whisper of hope before it could take root. Heck, the only friends she'd made in five years were the employees at the Nickelodeon, where she unofficially did chores so they'd let her sit and watch movies for hours. Who did she think she was, dreaming that it might be possible to have real friends? In a place like this, everyone was probably too busy fighting over a full serving of dinner to care about each other.

"Which one was Sally's bunk?" Piper asked.

The smile slid off the big redhead's face, and the whole room got quiet. Pudge's thumb jerked toward the bunk under the twins. At least it was the wall with the window.

Piper pushed her suitcase under the bed. She saw a rope ladder, piled in a heap on the floor, attached to the metal frame at one end. "Fire escape ladder?" she asked, standing back up.

"Uh huh," Pudge said. "Fitch was supposed to have a fire escape installed. Cheap old bag." She laughed, a booming noise that startled Piper. "It works good for sneakin' out, though, if you're willing to pay the price."

"Bad?"

"Bad enough," the braniac girl said, without looking up from her book. "Really not worth sneaking out."

We'll see about that, Piper thought. She planned on slipping out a little later tonight. The access couldn't be better. She would pretend to feel sick. When everyone else went down to dinner, out the window she'd go, easy as pie.

Piper shrugged off her army surplus backpack before sitting on the bed. She bounced up and down on the bunk experimentally, and decided to take another risk. “So what happened to Sally? Did she die, or what?”

Nobody answered, each girl suddenly consumed with what she was doing. Piper stopped bouncing and stared around the room, from one averted face to the next.

Finally, the one she thought had been asleep turned her head toward Piper. She looked like a tribal queen, Piper thought. High cheekbones, face framed by two long braids. Zonk’s voice was low and smooth, in contrast with the bitter look on her face. “She was adopted.”

Nothing more had to be said. If Piper had nothing else in common with this multi-colored group of rag-tag girls, she shared the jagged pain of being unwanted.

For the moment, they were united. But Piper knew it wouldn’t last long. Once they learned what she was determined to do, they would think she was crazy, a loser, an idiot, and so on. It had happened to her in every foster home so far—how many now? Ten? Eleven? It had been five years since her parents’ disappearance. Five years—each of them worse than the last.

The other girls might be able to respect Piper’s sworn oath to someday, somehow, go where her parents had gone, and to rescue them. But the whole truth was just too hard to believe. So she mostly kept the details to herself. The fact was, her parents had been captured by a pirate captain, and flown off in a ship carried through the sky by a dragon. Crazy as it was, Piper knew beyond a shadow of a doubt that they’d been taken to the Neverland.

“What ‘d’ ya say your name was?” Pudge’s loud voice interrupted Piper’s reverie.

Her heart sank at the scorn on Pudge’s face. Here we go, she thought. She answered as easily as she could. “Piper. Piper Pizzinni. You can call me Pip.” She’d never given anyone the option of calling her Pip before. That was what her parents had called her.

“Piper.” Pudge’s lip curled. “Yeah, I’ve heard about you. You’re the one who keeps getting caught trying to do a Peter Pan from high places.”

Piper looked back at Pudge and willed her face to stay blank.

“How dumb can you get?” Pudge went on. “If you want to off yourself, there are lots of easier ways. My mom used pills. Zonk’s mother just drank herself to death.”

“Shut...up.” Zonk didn’t move, didn’t open her eyes, but her voice cut the air like glass shards. Piper noted with satisfaction that it wiped the grin right off Pudge’s face. Unfortunately, it also layered mean onto the scorn.

“Just sayin’,” Pudge said to Zonk before turning on Piper. “Nah. I don’t think we’ll bother calling you Pip.” She leered. “We’ll just call you *Pipsqueak*.”

Piper scanned the other faces in the room. Except for Zonk’s, they mirrored Pudge’s. They liked having someone new at the bottom of the heap. She shrugged. “Fine,” she said. “Whatever.” She lay back on the bed, ignoring the jeering laughter.

Forget what she’d hoped about these girls becoming friends. She didn’t need them. She didn’t need anyone. She’d find her way to the Neverland on her own. In her mind, she flew through clouds, letting the soft moisture cool her burning cheeks.

CHAPTER TWO

The Painful Truth

Leaving the Fairy Kingdom to its dreary business, Belle blinked twice and ended her self-imposed exile. She had said she'd go find Peter's heir right away. But what was the hurry? She'd ignored the girl this long, what would a little more time hurt? The siren call of home vibrated in her bones. Choosing her destination, she willed herself high over the magical island.

She burst from darkness into light. The Neverland! At last! She took a deep breath to prepare for her descent, and promptly choked in dismay. Senses assaulted, she froze mid-dive. Smoky air clung, sticky on her wings. The reek of charred wood and sulfur burned her nose and planted a bitter taste in her mouth. Looking down, her eyes met a nightmare sight. "Oh, no!" she croaked. Apparently the vision she'd had during her meditation had been spot on.

The Neverland's familiar curves and ridges should have been fringed with green, crowned by ancient forests, its shores ringed by turquoise water. Instead it looked like something dead flung into a mud puddle.

Trembling began in the tips of Belle's wings and spread to her heart. "Shivering snails!" she whispered. "How long have I been gone?" Time in the Fairy Kingdom passed so slowly as to hardly matter. But any amount of time might have gone by in the Neverland while she'd sulked in the Crystal City.

Fury simmered in her belly and her cheeks burned. "Sheer stupidity," she muttered. "I thought he'd miss me so much he'd change his ways!" She hugged herself to quiet her shivers. Obviously, Captain Li'l Jack and his precious black dragon, Sincoraz, had been having a field day in her absence.

One thing was clear. The Neverland *had* to be saved. But not by a small female relative of Peter's. She'd do it herself. Covering her nose and mouth with her hands, Belle dropped straight for Kidd's Cove. The Jolly Roger would be anchored there. The pirate captain had some explaining to do.

She could have found Li'l Jack's porthole in her sleep. After all, she'd practically lived there in the years after Peter Pan left. She peered through the thick wavy glass, eyes watering. Sure enough, Captain Li'l Jack was in.

He stood, squinting at a silver vial hung from a chain around his neck. Belle shivered. The image echoed her meditation with disturbing accuracy. He clutched the vial with the bare metal claw that stood in for his right hand.

A lacey white sleeve draped the claw, but she'd seen him without long sleeves many years ago when he'd been a boy. His own right arm ended just below the elbow in a nasty nub. Two metal bars completed his forearm and became pincers. His left arm grew longer, almost to where the hand should be before it ended in an ugly scar. A metal hook capped the wrist instead of a hand.

Glancing up, he spotted her. His lip twitched, and his moustache jumped.

She watched as he unlatched the porthole with his hook. It was JAS Hook's very hook – Li'l Jack had been awarded the famous appendage when he'd become Captain of the Jolly Roger. It was much shinier and sharper than the hook he'd arrived with.

Li'l Jack beamed a toothy grin.

Belle knew better than to fall for that smile of his.

Belle took a deep breath. *Remember what you came for*, she told herself. Aloud, she said, "Is that what I think it is?" She pointed to the vial, still clutched in Li'l Jack's claw. If it was, she understood completely what was wrong here. The life had literally been sucked out of the Neverland by that horrible black dragon, Sincoraz.

“The very same. Sincoraz’s Elixir of Life. Liquid gold,” he chortled. “Soon I’ll have enough to use on meself – to grow *real hands*.”

Belle lost her barely-held composure. “I can’t believe you would exchange the Neverland for hands!” she shrieked.

“Me hands are me life dream,” he snarled. “The chance to be whole is worth much more than a silly island and a stupid old fairy godmother.”

Belle gasped. “Stupid? Old? Everything you enjoy is because of me. Give me my due respect, young man.”

Li’l Jack gave a sharp bark of laughter. “Young man? Take another look, granny.” The look he tossed her added insult to injury. “I’m not yer little adopted Pan-replacement anymore. I haven’t needed ye for years.” His voice calmed. “Besides, ye’ve been at sea five years yerself. What course did ye sail, anyway?”

“Five years?” Shock filled Belle’s head like a balloon inflating. She sank to the plush red arm of Jack’s chair, thudding to a seat. “I’ve been gone five years?” she repeated. “It’s been that long since we argued?”

“Oh, aye. ‘Twas five years ago I captured Peter Pan’s grown daughter and her fool of a husband.” The words clearly tasted sweet.

“And fed them to Sincoraz.” Belle shuddered. “You promised not to go on collecting humans for dragon fodder! You said you’d let things return to their natural order.”

The captain cocked his head. “Perhaps I did.” He shrugged. “And so I will, after I have me hands. Which I haven’t. Not quite.” He lifted the vial to his ear and shook it gently.

“If you let it go on any longer, the Neverland will die!” She must make him understand. “*You* let Sincoraz strip it of life. *You’re* the one responsible for this.” Her anger turned to fear and she felt suddenly weak. With a wave of dread, she knew. Her own fate was linked to the Neverland’s. If she stayed here, and the Neverland died, so would she. Her vision blurred and

she felt faint. This was horrible. It seemed she *couldn't* save her home, and this – this powerful protégé of hers, *wouldn't*.

Captain Li'l Jack watched her with a shrewd smile. "Perhaps I am responsible." He shrugged again. "When one wants something, there are sacrifices to be made."

Gathering her forces, Belle flew at Li'l Jack's face, stopping inches before his eyes. "Sacrifices?" she fumed. "But who's had to sacrifice? Not you!"

She didn't know why she didn't stop talking right there. If she'd had any sense at all, she would have kept her cards close to her chest. It seemed she couldn't help herself. "Oh," she chuckled, "but you'll get yours, Li'l Jack. The power of Pan can still heal the Neverland. And when it does, you'd better watch out!"

"Ha, ha, ha." Li'l Jack clapped his hook against his claw. The metallic pinging echoed his sarcasm. "I dealt with that threat long ago. I did away with Pan's heirs, me fairy godmother, in case yer mind's completely gone."

Belle whirred to the porthole. She hung suspended just long enough to hurl a sentence. "Ah, but Captain, what you don't realize, is that you *missed one*."

Out the porthole she flew, as fast as her old fairy wings would carry her. There was no time to spare. If the Neverland was to be saved, she had to get Peter's only remaining heir *now*.

Even if it was just a girl – just an orphaned girl named Piper Pizzinni.

CHAPTER THREE

Flight Failure: The Evening of Piper's Eleventh Birthday

Even for January in Seattle, the fog tonight seemed impossibly dense. Good thing, Pip thought, because she was really going for it tonight. The Neverland or bust. Between her size, her dark clothes and the fog, she would be next to invisible.

Red lights from the open drawbridge pulsed, heartbeats suspended in the night's damp curtain. A ship's horn sounded, signaling its successful passage. The bridge tooted in response, its open jaws slowly leveling to flat roadway once again.

She'd thought of using this bridge quite a while ago. She just hadn't tried it until now. Pudge's jeering had convinced her to go for it. No glory in being known as the kid who tried to do a Peter Pan if she didn't follow through.

The bridge bells stopped dinging, and the safety arms lifted for traffic to resume its onward push. The breath Pip had been holding came out in a whoosh. No point in putting it off. It wouldn't get any easier, that was for sure. She hiked her backpack a little higher, feeling the awkward shift of the bulk tied beneath. The suspended red velour case held her mother's swords.

The swords were the only thing Pip had left of her parents and their life in the theater. She thought of them as her legacy. Five years ago, Piper had been the most accomplished 5-year-old swordsperson in the city. But like anything that made her think too painfully of her missing parents, she tended to avoid the swords. She'd only retrieved them tonight from their

hiding place because if she really did make it to the Neverland, if she got the chance to save her parents, she would need these swords.

The first step onto the bridge's sidewalk was the hardest. Her legs felt like cooked green beans. But she could do it; she could put one foot in front of the other. It was only another fifty paces to reach the middle.

Reaching the center of the bridge span, Piper hoisted herself onto the broad metal rail, kneeling a moment while she collected the courage to stand. One advantage of pea-soup fog – she couldn't see the water below at all – not with her eyes. Her stomach seemed to see it just fine. Breathing through her nose, she shifted to a squat, and then pushed to her feet.

She wished she could see the sky. She'd wanted to look at the stars as she aimed for them. Even a seagull in flight would do. Well, she would just have to imagine them. Pip closed her eyes, and stretched her arms out to the sides. She pictured stars, and birds. She saw her parents' faces in her mind's eye. Their smiles helped unwind the ropy knot in her gut. With a nod of decision, she opened her eyes, and allowed her weight to tip forward.

Something big buzzed past her nose. Pip jerked her head back, batting the glowing blur away with one hand. What was that, a weird giant firefly? She'd barely recovered her balance when metal on metal crashed behind her. Before she could turn to see what it was, an arm hooked her around the waist, and dragged her off the rail.

"Oh no, you don't!"

She couldn't see the man's face, only a headlight beaming from his bicycle helmet. It lit the screaming-yellow clad arm holding her like a vice. A matching arm appeared, its hand holding the lit face of a cell phone. He dialed 9-1-1.

Piper struggled, trying to get loose. She could run – somewhere – anywhere! But the arm only squeezed tighter.

"Emergency on University Bridge. A kid almost jumped."

She fought harder. The man cursed, yanked her into the air, and dragged her against his hip. The phone cracked into her head as he tried to keep her still. Sirens wailed. Hot tears flooded down her cheeks.

It wasn't the first time she'd ridden in a fire engine. But it was the first time she'd been too miserable to enjoy it, even a little. The firemen had called CPS. Miss Henning had told them she was a ward of Mrs. Fitch. Now they were driving her back there. Sandwiched between two bulky men in uniforms, all she could do was watch with dread.

Lights flashing, they pulled up to the foster home. The fire truck barely fit on this narrow city street, with cars parked for the night on both sides.

"Come on, little Miss." The lead fireman looked at the house, and back at Piper. His eyes revealed a flash of sympathy. "Let's get this over with, shall we?"

Piper didn't bother to answer. She slid over and allowed the man to help her down onto the sidewalk. Her whole body felt like lead. This was the very worst thing she could have imagined. No flight to the Neverland, and no quick end, either. The pain she was in for wouldn't be nearly as brief.

CHAPTER FOUR

Fetching Pan's Heir

Belle ignored her fatigue as she flew. Li'l Jack and Sincoraz would be out tonight hunting the same game as she. Belle had to get there first. Fortunately, the more distance she put between her and the Neverland's ravaged shores, the more energy she had. She didn't allow her mind to travel the road of what would happen to her if the Neverland drew its last breath.

Dropping through a layer of clouds, she saw Seattle's world-renowned landmark stretching toward her: the Space Needle. Good. That meant she was close. From here she angled northeast, following the sirens shrieking toward Pill Hill. Now, slightly to the west, until she spotted a shabby gray flat-roofed building squeezed between grand old Victorian era houses. She sped toward a lit second-story window and peered inside.

A frumpy middle-aged woman sat at her dressing table, squinting in the mirror as she rolled ugly poky-looking curlers into her hair. Wrong window. This must be the foster mother's room. Belle fluffed her own short strawberry-blonde hair, grateful she didn't have to go through any such torture to make herself beautiful. Not that she didn't have her own beauty tricks.

She zoomed over the roof and dropped to a dimmer window on the other side. Landing on the corner of the windowsill, she peeked in. A whole gaggle of girls – this must be the place. But her Pan-sensor didn't pulse.

Belle flew around the house to a narrow, high window angled open a crack. Ah. Definite Pan-sensor activity, here. She squeezed in. Heaving herself up to perch on top of a light fixture, she cursed with the effort. This was why she didn't let anyone call her "Tink." It wasn't seemly for an aging— make that middle-aged—fairy.

Belle eyed the child on the bathroom floor below. Sitting cross-legged, the girl clutched her belly with one arm while half-heartedly scrubbing the tile floor with a toothbrush. Tears coursed down the girl's cheeks. She was silent, but her shoulders shuddered with repressed sobs.

The kid was pitiful-looking. She wore blue jeans, worn and patched at the knees. Her too-big sweatshirt belonged in a ragbag instead of on the girl's skinny upper frame. Holes crowned her too-small high-topped tennis shoes, allowing white-socked big toes to pop out and breathe. A swollen black and blue eye and a grim expression completed the picture.

She didn't look anything like Peter. Belle felt relieved. The girl's hair, while short, was dark and straight, not auburn and wavy. Poking out in all directions, it was even scruffier than Peter's had been. Belle leaned the other way, cantilevering herself over the light fixture to see the girl's other eye.

When she saw it, she froze. The round green eye, rimmed in wet, dark lashes, could have been Peter's own. Belle had only seen Peter cry once. She shuddered at the memory. It had been over that ratty girl, Wendy. But looking at the green eye below, dripping tears onto the girl's olive-toned cheeks, Belle's heart hollowed with pain. She didn't need her Pan-sensor. She knew, just from the pain in her heart, that this was Peter's granddaughter.

Belle felt as if the air had been squeezed out of her. This was it. Time to face her doom. She'd found Peter's heir, and the girl was a sniveling, useless mess.

*

Pip gripped her stomach, hoping the pressure would suffocate her sobs. She'd tried to keep from crying. She'd taken Fitch's blows without a sound. She hadn't so much as twitched when the old bag tore off her backpack; red velour sword sheath still attached, and locked it in the cupboard under the stairs. She'd almost managed to keep her face a careful blank while being dragged up the stairs by her ear and marched past the girls' dorm room. She'd known

without looking that they were all staring, trying to catch a glimpse of the newest girl getting what was coming to her. She knew they wanted nothing more than to hear her cry out; to prove they were right about her. She hadn't given them the satisfaction.

Fitch had thrown her to the tile floor in the institutional bathroom, shoved a worn-out toothbrush into one hand, a can of Comet cleanser and a rag into the other. "You aren't coming out until I say it's clean enough," the foster mother crowed. "Let's see if you still have the energy to run away after you've cleaned all the toilets, all the sinks, and the whole floor." She'd slammed the door, but stuck her ugly face back in for a parting shot. "I bet your parents were as good-for-nothing as you are. Their drug lord probably killed them when they didn't pay up."

The shock of the insult slid past her defenses and Pip felt the blood drain from her face. Fitch smirked with pleasure and slammed the door again. The sound of the skeleton key locking the bathroom door echoed in the bare room. The metallic ping and click seemed very loud, and very final.

Piper finally let her world crumple, safe as she was from observers. Tears coursed hot on her cheeks, and her gut twisted with pain. But these were nothing compared to the cloud of hopelessness ballooning over her. It felt like a dark shape, pressing down, squeezing out anything good, leaving only black despair in its wake.

Yes, she'd been pulled off of high places many times. Each time, she'd positioned herself to fly off to the Neverland, but she'd always held back. Before tonight, that is.

It hadn't been only Pudge's challenge that sent her to University Bridge's rail tonight. Today was the fifth anniversary of her parents' disappearance. Today was her eleventh birthday. Her mother had always told her that the number eleven was magic. She'd waited, to really try to fly, until tonight, believing that the magic of eleven would carry her skyward, like pixie dust.

So tonight, she'd really tried. The hopelessness that enveloped her was not because the bug and the cyclist had kept her from flight. She'd known – in that long moment when her body tipped toward the water below – that when her feet left the cement rail, she would go nowhere but down. The glowing bug and the cyclist had saved her life. The trouble was, she couldn't imagine anything worth saving it for. Not now that she knew she could never, ever, fly to the Neverland. She could never save her parents – she would never see them again. A new flood of tears slicked her cheeks, and she worked desperately to swallow her sobs.

Her mind flicked back to that long moment of shifting balance, of leaning over her toes, and beginning to let go. But this time, her mind tracked the edges of her vision.

She saw the glowing orb, in slow motion, journey toward her face. The shroud of fog both softened and intensified its light. She felt wings first brush her cheek, then vibrate past her nose. Instead of the focus she'd actually had, at the time, of the parents she wanted to reach, the vision of memory brought her a clear image of the bright flying being. It seemed to be a tiny man wearing a dark tailored suit. He had brown hair, a sweet smile, and translucent wings the same golden color as the crown on his head.

Pip gulped, tears colliding with surprise in a hiccup. Eyes wide open, but unseeing, she replayed the memory again. This time, she added sound. There was the low thrum of cars on the bridge behind her, louder, then fading as each one crossed the bridge's metal grating. She could hear the higher noise of the approaching bicycle, tires humming on pavement. And there was something else. It was a voice. Soft, low, and calm – as if spoken inside her head. "Not yet," it said. "Not yet."

She hiccupped again, hysteria winning momentarily over sorrow. Great. She was seeing things now. *Mental delusions*. She remembered the term from counseling sessions, overheard therapists conferring. Mental delusions, indeed. It was probably just her survival instinct making an imaginative showing to keep her from offing herself here and now.

She gripped the toothbrush tighter in her hand, and set to scrubbing the floor with more will power. It was funny, really. Her parents had raised her surrounded by the magical world of the theater. Illusions made real. Costumes, lights, two-dimensional set pieces, exaggerated make-up and voices projected, to be heard in the back row. Love, joy, hatred, anger, confusion, yearning, all these and more had swirled around the seats where Piper sat, watching rehearsals, watching performances. Such deep and magical journeys, every one an illusion.

Even the fighting was an illusion. She knew the mechanics of swordplay, the sweat, the fatigue, and yet – a killing blow was never real on stage. So of course, it made sense that in her time of greatest heartbreak, an illusion would appear to try to save her.

Seeing movement out of the corner of her eye, Piper looked up, and began to laugh. This time it wasn't a well-dressed fairy king. This fairy was a slightly disheveled old woman. She had strawberry blonde pixie hair; she wore a short blue filmy dress finished off with leggings and boots. But what really took the cake was her face. High cheekbones and cat-like sparkling blue eyes held an echo of what had once been stunning beauty. Now, she was – well, she was ancient! She had to be a hundred years old if she was a day. She was a tiny great grandmother fairy trying to look like she was still hip.

Piper laughed until new tears came. It really was terribly funny. If nothing else, her mind had a heck of a sense of humor. She shook her head, and bent to reapply herself to cleaning the floor.

“And just what is so funny, may I ask?” The vision flushed, and crossed her arms defensively. Hovering mid-air, the ancient fairy's wings thrummed like a hummingbird's. As gracefully and precisely as a ballerina, she settled onto the lip of a sink.

Piper choked, and coughed. She wiped her eyes, and wiped them again. She shook her head and blinked, hard, trying to make the apparition disappear. It wouldn't. The great

grandmother fairy was still there. Cautious, Pip reached out her hand to touch it. When her finger brushed the soft blue cloth of the dress, the fairy jerked back.

“Paws off, kid!”

Pip froze, blinking. “You’re real?” Her voice croaked, throat still tight from emotion.

“Who are you? Am I seeing things?”

“Of course I’m real,” the vision said. “I’m Belle, and you’re coming with me to the Neverland.”

Piper just stared. The words seemed to take forever to enter her brain. When they did, they swirled around, faster and faster, like a dancing dervish. *The Neverland. You’re coming with me to the Neverland.*

“Are you... really a fairy?” Pip asked. Hope and doubt fought across her face.

“The Neverland’s one and only. Formerly known as Tinker Bell.”

“But... you’re too old to be Tinker Bell!”

The fairy snorted. “Long story. No time to tell you now. We’ve got to go.”

The fairy was real! She had come, for *her*, from the Neverland. She would take her to her parents, and they’d all live happily ever after. Magic existed after all, just as she’d been brought up to believe. Relief poured through her limbs. She *hadn’t* dreamed that night when her parents were taken. It had been real. The pirate, the ship, the dragon—all real. But why, oh why, had it taken this fairy five years to come for her?

Joy took a jump and a twist, and suddenly, Piper was steaming mad. “It’s about time,” she growled. “What the heck took you so long? You could’ve come ages ago!”

The fairy flinched, then flashed back. “You think you’re all I’ve had to think about? I’m here now, so now is when we go.” The old fairy’s color was still high. “Unless you don’t have it in you, in which case, I’ll be on my way.” She flounced into the air and sped toward the high, open window.

“Wait!” Pip cried. Panic gripped like a fist. She was so close. So close! And now she’d gone and said the wrong thing. She was going to miss this once-in-a-lifetime chance completely. She swallowed, throat gone dry. “Please.” Her voice came out in a rasp.

The fairy turned, one hand on top of the inward-tilting window. She stared at Pip. She looked angry, and suspicious.

“I’m sorry,” Pip hurried on. “I don’t know anything about it, you’re right. I just... I really want to go. Please take me with you.”

The fairy nodded once. She hummed back to her sink perch, radiating dislike.

Piper stared, hardly daring to breathe. “I can come?”

Great grandmother Tinker Bell, if that’s who she was, shrugged. “How fast can you be ready?”

Pip let out the breath she’d been holding. “Can the other girls come?” She didn’t know why she’d asked that. It wasn’t like they were her friends.

“No,” the fairy snapped. “And you can’t tell them where you’re going.” She seemed flustered. She smoothed her little dress, then her hair. “It’s against the rules,” she said, lifting her chin.

“They wouldn’t believe me anyway.” Pip levered herself to her feet, not caring when she upended the can of Comet. “I have to leave them a message, though. It wouldn’t be right if I didn’t.”

Old Tink raised an eyebrow and stared, imperious.

Pip stood on tiptoe, reached into the medicine cabinet and extracted a tube of lipstick. Opening it, she smiled at its bright red color. Perfect. She wrote on the mirror, *I’ll be back*.

The fairy looked at the lipstick message and made a derogatory noise. “Humph.” She switched her attention to Piper. “Can you sneak downstairs?”

Piper looked at the winged-old lady like she was crazy. “Do dogs like bones?” There was a nail file in the medicine cabinet—she could pick the bathroom lock easily. There were hairpins, too, for the lock on the cabinet under the stairs. She’d heard Fitch slam the door to the girls’ room shut, so sneaking past them wouldn’t be hard.

“Okay, smarty pants,” the fairy said. She narrowed her eyes and launched herself back toward the open window. Straddling the window’s edge, she turned. “Meet me outside the front door,” she said, and wriggled through.

*

Belle perched on the outside lip of the foster home’s front doorframe and waited. She clicked her nails, barely containing her anxiety. Seconds, minutes – it felt like hours. Hope tugged. The child had shown some spirit at the end there. Perhaps there was a chance for the Neverland! But it was too soon to know. Right now, she just had to get this girl out of the house, and into the air, before it was too late. And it wasn’t the foster mother she was worried about.

Unable to resist, she zoomed above the rooftops, looking toward the Space Needle. Peter’s daughter and her husband had lived with Piper only a few blocks from there. That was where Captain L’il Jack and Sincoraz had come for them five years ago. Since he didn’t have a Pan-sensor like she did, that was where they would start looking for the heir he had missed.

Sure enough, even through the haze of fog, she saw the glow of fire, and heard wailing sirens speeding toward what had to be damage done by the black dragon. Her heart froze, then beat far too fast. He might not have a Pan-sensor, but Lil Jack had a sixth sense when it came to her. It wouldn’t take him very long to find her here, and with her, Peter’s heir.

Just when she turned to find a way inside to look for the child, the door burst open.

Piper ran out, muddy-green canvas backpack slung over her shoulders, a long red velour-wrapped package tied to the bottom. "Come on, fairy, whoever you are," she cried as she dashed away from the house. "Fitch is coming, you'd better be quick!"

Summoning all her power, Belle peppered fairy dust over the girl. It was all she had, so it better be enough. Renewing her supply would take a few days. When you were a couple hundred years old, things just didn't work like they used to.

Belle dove to the girl's eye level. "Think lovely, wonderful thoughts!" she commanded.

The girl stopped in her tracks and concentrated. The furrow in her brow deepened.

"Wonderful thoughts! Not angry thoughts!" Belle yanked the collar of the girl's sweatshirt to keep her moving.

Frowning, the child tried again. Her eyes moved up as she imagined something. Nothing happened. She met Belle's eyes. Was that it, was she doing it right?

"Stop her!" The bad-hair foster mother hollered from the front steps. Lights blinked on in the adjacent houses. No time to lose. Belle dove again, this time to Piper's waist. The back belt-loop would do. Grabbing hold, she took off, drawing the pixie-dusted child up through the air with her.

The girl's gasp of wonder tickled Belle's fancy. No matter the child was just a girl and it wouldn't take much to amaze her. It still felt good.

Belle steered in the direction that would take them farthest from Sincoraz and Li'l Jack. She didn't think. Because the kid hung by a belt loop, she now faced the drama.

"Look, a fire!" Pip called. "It's near the Space Needle. See it? The top is always outlined in lights." Silence as the child took it in. "Hey, I used to live over there!" she cried.

"I know," Belle muttered under her breath. "Believe me, I know." She changed her direction, seeking to distract the girl, as if the child's interest might draw the gaze of Sincoraz,

and with it, that of Captain Li'l Jack. "Come on," Belle said, "help me out here. Try the lovely thoughts again, will you?"

CHAPTER FIVE

Unwelcome Discoveries

And so it was that Piper found herself sailing through the night sky toward the Neverland, butt-first.

She felt a shiver of pleasure in her tummy. Glee sparkled in her limbs. As it did, her body floated up toward the fairy. She almost flattened out.

“You’re doing it!” Belle shouted.

“I am? What am I doing?” Pip thought hard about it. Immediately, she sank back to where she’d been before.

“Well, you *were* doing it. Try again. Think of something that makes you *happy!*”

Piper thought about her parents. She saw the faces she loved in her mind, and sadness filled her.

“No, that’s not it!” The fairy snapped.

Pip tried again. She thought about skewering that nasty pirate. The one with hook and claw who’d taken her parents. Anger rushed in, and she returned to her doubled-over position.

“Aw, forget it. We’ll work on it later. I’ll take it from here.”

Discouraged, Pip stopped remembering and just paid attention to the glow of Seattle fading into the distance. The fog, so dense when she’d stood on University Bridge, had thinned, making the city below show clearly in patches. The twinkling lights softened as they flew higher and higher.

Finally the bright moonlight beaming around her eclipsed all the lit places below. Her nose stung as she breathed the cold air. Clouds soft as silk brushed by. She felt tiny in the deep quiet of the vast sky through which they flew.

Between the thrill, the quiet, and her exhaustion from all that had happened today, Piper couldn't keep her eyes open. She welcomed the peace of sleep.

The next thing Pip knew, she'd landed in a tangle on hard ground. Pushing herself to her knees, she shook her head and looked for the fairy.

Belle sprawled on a large rock nearby, next to a huge old tree. She looked all tired out. "We're here, sleepyhead."

"Where?" Pip struggled to her feet. The swords banged her behind as she stood.

"The Neverland." Belle pointed to the enormous dead tree next to her. "This is the Never Tree. It used to be inside Peter's Underground Home. They sawed it off every day in the morning, and used it for a table at dinner." She stopped, remembering, then sighed and shrugged. "Then Peter left, and it grew."

Pip stared around her. This had been a forest once. Now barren trees stood; skeletons against a gray sky. Broken-off hollow trunks encircled her. Charred ground reached in every direction. Boulders, like the one Belle sat on, lay strewn like a giant's game of marbles. The only colors she saw were shades of brown, black, and gray.

The circle of broken off hollow trees around her brought a dim flash of memory. She counted them – there were seven. Could it be they were the entrances to the Underground Home where the Lost Boys and Peter had lived? No. She dismissed the thought. It couldn't be.

"This can't be the Neverland." Pip croaked. "You're joking, right?" It looked like a place zombies might rise up out of, a place with an evil spell on it.

"I wish I were." Belle leaned back on her hands. She stretched her feet out in front of her as she stared at their grim surroundings. "All this is Sincoraz's doing."

"Who's Sincoraz?" Pip asked.

"It's a dragon. It feeds off life force. Most any life force. That's what it needs to thrive. At first, when Sincoraz arrived, everything stayed more or less in balance, but then—" Belle

hesitated. “Well, soon it consumed almost everything living. We fairies started aging. Most died. In fact, I’m the last fairy here in the Neverland.”

“I’m sorry,” Pip said. Belle looked so sad. She didn’t know what else to say.

Suddenly, the fairy’s words sunk in.

“So where is it?” Piper looked up, then all around, expecting the humongous black winged lizard she’d seen five years ago carrying the Jolly Roger away with her parents in it to swoop down and burn her to a crisp.

“Sincoraz lives in the heart of the Neverland. Deep in a pit of its own making.” Belle shrugged. “I’ll show you eventually.”

Pip’s mind whirled. What did this mean? The Neverland: dead looking and empty. “What about the pirates? Did the dragon kill all the pirates?” Would her parents’ captor still be alive?

“Oh no.” Belle gave a sharp laugh. “Captain Li’l Jack has an *understanding* with Sincoraz. It doesn’t eat the pirates.” She looked pointedly at Pip. “Fortunately for you, it doesn’t eat children either. Says they aren’t ripe yet.” She made a derisive noise. “But frankly, I have my doubts. I’d steer clear of it, if I were you.”

The old fairy’s gaze swept the area around them. “And fortunately for me, there are other things it doesn’t like, too. Mostly the insects. Also the toadstools, snakes, worms and spiders. So I’ve had a little company.” Her eyes again settled on Pip. “But you’re here now. I brought you to change all that.”

“What are you talking about?” Pip stared at the wind-blown fairy. “I can’t kill a dragon. Not even with my swords.”

Belle laughed, this time a brighter, happier sound. “Oh, no. You’ll fix it all because you are Peter’s heir. Nothing is as powerful as the joy-filled heart of Pan.”

Pip blinked twice and poked her fingers in her ears to see if something blocked her hearing. "I'm who?"

"Peter Pan's heir. His granddaughter, in fact."

"I am?" Feelings of all colors shot through Pip. Voices spoke on top of each other in her head.

Yesss! I knew it!

Like heck you are. If you are Pan's heir, you could've come here long ago.

Pan doesn't need parents. If you're his heir, you wouldn't care so much about saving yours.

That's a load of crap. This fairy is old and crazy.

You were right. That's why the pirate came for your parents. It really is your fault he stole them away.

Pip shook her head to quiet the noise. "Who are you, anyway?" she blurted.

"Like I told you, I'm Belle. Used to be called Tinker Bell. I was Peter's very own fairy. Until he left, that is." She grimaced.

"Like I said, you're too old to be Tinker Bell."

The pixie shrugged. "Time started to pass after Peter left. Slowly at first, then faster and faster. The few Lost Boys still here started to grow up. Most left, a few joined the pirates." Belle made a face. "I actually look pretty darn good, considering." She fluffed her hair and smoothed her dress. "I changed my name to suit my more mature self."

Pip backed away. "I don't care about your problems or what you want me to do here. I came here for a reason of my own: to save my parents from that pirate. That – Captain Li'l Jack, right?"

"You came here..." Belle trailed off. Her face grew pale. "What do you mean, you 'came to save your parents?'"

“That pirate took my parents five years ago. He left in the Jolly Roger, carried by the dragon – Sincoraz. My parents were onboard.”

Belle looked even paler. “You know about that?” She sat cross-legged, elbows on knees, chin propped in the heels of her hands. For the first time, she looked troubled.

“Yes,” Pip said. She spoke firmly to drown out the quivers of fear whispering through her. “I came to the Neverland to rescue them. That’s why I brought my mother’s swords with me.”

“Your mother’s swords.” Belle raised an eyebrow, color coming back into her face. “She was a swordswoman?”

“The best. She taught me when I was tiny, and I haven’t forgotten how. My mother could fight, dance, laugh, sing – she was, *is*,” Pip corrected herself, “the best mother ever.”

“Of course she could do all those things.” In the same cross-legged seated position, Belle now floated a foot above the boulder. She seemed to be losing patience, and with it, gravity’s influence. “Your mother was Peter Pan’s daughter. But those swords weren’t hers. They were Peter’s. She got them from him.”

“No.” Pip shook her head, hating the twist of rising panic.

“Yes.” Belle sank back to the rock and glared at Pip. Hands on hips, fire in her eyes, she looked like a fairy berserker. “You don’t look anything like Peter, you know.”

“I look like my father,” Pip retorted.

“Ah yes, your father.” Belle’s tone dripped with sarcasm.

“My father was the most talented set designer in Seattle.” Pip wouldn’t stand here and listen to this old fairy’s insults.

“Set designer, you say. Ha! What good is that? I need heart and laughter and a joy-filled youth like Peter! Instead, I get your scowling face.” Belle flew over Pip’s head in uneven circles, spewing disappointment. “Peter’s granddaughter. The daughter of some man who drew

pictures. If Peter's heir had to be a girl, it should've been your mother, not you. At least *she* knew how to think lovely, wonderful thoughts!"

"Well, why didn't you bring *her* here instead?" Pip yelled back.

"She was too old by the time I needed help. When she was young, I had things handled!"

Pip batted the air over her head to keep Belle at bay. "You did, huh? Yeah, it really looks like you've got things handled." She hollered the sarcastic words, gesturing at the barren landscape around them.

"You're hardly in a position to criticize." Belle's wings fairly buzzed as she flew at Piper. Her grimace added even more wrinkles to her fairy face. "You've spent the last five years bouncing from one foster home to another."

"Well, so what if I did? Whose fault is that? And who needs you, anyway?" Pip felt her throat squeeze with tears. "I'm going to find the pirates and get my parents back."

"How're you going to get there? Fly?" Belle taunted.

"No." Pip bit her trembling lip. "I'm going to walk on my own two feet. Just tell me where the Jolly Roger is anchored."

Belle hovered, arms folded over her chest. She buzzed there, saying nothing for several moments. Finally she stuck out an arm and pointed. "Take a hundred steps that way, and you'll see a trickle of water. The trickle grows to Kidd's Creek, which dumps into Kidd's Cove. That's where the Jolly Roger is moored."

Pip nodded, and walked off in search of her parents.

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