

# NEVERBOUND

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*O my Love is like a red, red rose  
That's newly sprung in June;  
O my Love is like the melody  
That's sweetly played in tune.*

*So fair art thou, my bonnie lass,  
So deep in love am I;  
And I will love thee still, my dear,  
Till a' the seas gang dry.*

*Till a' the seas gang dry, my dear,  
And the rocks melt wi' the sun;  
I will love thee still, my dear,  
While the sands o' life shall run.*

Robert Burns



# Prologue

*London, 1791*

“JAMES! COME HERE, SWEET boy.”

Mother’s hand is pale when she reaches for me, but she’s smiling, and the sunlight is dancing through the high windows, sprinkling her nearly white skin with flecks of gold.

I take her hand and let her draw me towards her, and the pianoforte she sits behind.

“I wasn’t sure you were awake,” I say. “How are you feeling?”

“Much better now that I have you here with me.” She smiles again, squeezing my hand softly before she lets me go to rest her long, graceful fingers on the pianoforte’s keys. “Did you know I have learned a new song?”

She plays a few notes, sweet, dulcet tones that linger in the room. I watch beams of sunlight catch the swirling dust in the air, imagining how the music makes it dance around my mother’s head like twirling stars.

“They call it Red, Red Rose,” Mother says, moving her fingers slowly over the keys.

“But I already know this one,” I say.

“Aye, it’s a wee old ditty.” Mother smiles fondly at me, and I smile back. I adore it when she falls back into her old Scottish lilt, even though Father dislikes it. He says she should try to sound like a proper English lady. “But the words are new, see?”

Then she sings for me.  
*Till a' the seas gang dry, my dear,  
 And the rocks melt wi' the sun;  
 I will love thee still, my dear,  
 While the sands o' life shall run.*

"Mother!" I exclaim, startled when I see the tears glistening in the corners of her eyes. "Why are you crying? Does it hurt? Shall I send for Hetty, or the physician?"

"No, no." She dabs her sky-blue eyes with a lace handkerchief. "No need to fret, my dear boy. I'm just a wee bit homesick, that is all."

I catch her hand between mine. Mother feels cold – she always feels chilly these days. "One day, I shall buy a grand ship," I promise her earnestly, "and I shall take you on a wonderful journey back to Scotland."

"One day, when you're all grown up, aye?" Mother smiles again, leaning over to press a kiss on top of my head. "I would love that so very much, James."

"James!"

The harsh voice behind us instinctively makes me shrink.

Father stands in the doorway, dressed in his stern navy jacket, white lace rippling around his throat like sea foam. The lines around his mouth are hard. I know he worries about Mother, but sometimes, I think I displease him no matter what I do.

"Do not tire your mother," he tells me.

"Elias, it's fine. I welcome his company."

"James should be concentrating on his studies. The governess tells me he's been running and hiding in the gardens..."

"He's just a boy."

"Boys grow up." Father studies me so intently that I have to stop myself from shying away behind Mother's flowing silk skirts. "Which is why you shall be joining me on my next voyage. You can start as a shipmate. I trust you'll work hard and earn your way to the top."

"I... I'm to sail on the Sparrow with you?" Anxiety mingles with excitement. A real sea voyage! Father has taken me on shorter trading

routes, but I have never been away from home for longer than two weeks. I'd miss Mother so much. But...all the adventures to be had out on the vast open sea! "Might we even see pirates?"

Finally, a smile breaks through Father's stern mask. "One should hope not, James. Though perhaps they are closer than you think. And no, you will not join me on the Sparrow, this time. We'll have the Jolly Venture. I expect to be appointed Commodore soon... Nothing would make me prouder than to see my son follow in my footsteps."



## CHAPTER 1

# Vivienne

“YOU’RE NOT MY MOTHER!”

Oliver slams the door between us. For a ten-year-old, he’s got a lot of strength in his skinny arms.

My ears ring and stupid tears sting my eyes.

*I know*, I want to shout back. *I know I’m not Mom, you stupid little monkey!* But instead, I bite my tongue so hard I taste blood, because saying those words out loud will only twist the dagger in his gut.

My breath comes out in quick, tense gasps, faster and faster.

*Stop it, Vivienne!* I can’t be panicking right now; it’s the last thing I need. With an almost painful effort, I try to breathe in through my nose, out through my mouth. We both know that Mom is never coming back, and neither is Dad, and we are all alone. Two lost children, both suffering, scared and confused. I’m twenty-one, but ever since that fatal car crash, I’ve felt nauseous and numb, and definitely not like a grown-up at all.

*In through my nose... Out through my mouth.*

I listen to Oliver’s angry footsteps on the stairs, then another loud bang when he slams his bedroom door shut.

He’ll be sobbing into his pillow next, and I don’t know how to make it better.

Shaking, I wipe the tears away and turn to the kitchen counter to unpack the grocery bag. A carton of milk. A bag of cut-up veggies, some

eggs and bacon. It's a dinner that I can whip up in fifteen minutes, but frankly, every dinner that I manage to put on the table at all has felt like a small victory.

Sighing, I glance at the mess Oliver left on the dining table. Bits of clay and paint and glue and cardboard are everywhere.

*Pick up your stuff.* That's all I said that made him explode in this tearful rage. The rational side of me knows that it's not *really* about picking up his stuff. Oliver's falling apart without our parents. He's broken and hurting. But my own broken and hurting parts are raging. All I want is to have some fucking dinner at the fucking dining table, like we used to do. Is that too much to ask?

With jerky movements, I get the skillet from the kitchen drawer, put it on the induction hob and start preparing dinner.

When it's ready, I consider just wiping the whole dinner table clear with one big swoop, but finally decide against it. I put the lid on the skillet to keep the food warm and open the door to the stairs. "Ollie? Oliver? Dinner's done."

No reply.

I sigh deeply and drag my feet up the stairs. Automatically, my gaze lingers on the photo on the wall of the upstairs landing, where Mom and Dad are smiling brightly into the camera, with Eyjafjallajökull – Iceland's hardest to pronounce volcano – in the background. The picture was taken on their ten-year anniversary, two years before their fatal accident.

"Oliver." I give a loud knock on his door. "Hello? I said dinner's ready."

"Not hungry."

His voice sounds muffled and strained.

I open the door and step into his dimly lit bedroom, gingerly avoid stepping on Lightning McQueen and several other Cars toys that are scattered on the floor, and finally reach his bed. "Hey."

My little brother is on his belly, hugging his pillow. He looks so small. And just like that, all my annoyance fades into thin air.

I lay down next to him, my arm around his back, and snuggle my face



into his chestnut curls. “Ollie Elephant.”

Just five short years ago, I could make him giggle so hard with that little pet name. “*I don’t have a trunk!*” he used to laugh.

Now I hear him give a tearful sniff. He lifts his head a little, wiping snot on the sleeve of his T-shirt. “I’m not hungry,” he says again.

“I know.” I stroke his hair. “But you have to eat sometimes.”

“If I don’t, I’ll die,” he says solemnly. “And see mom and dad again.”

God, this child needs a fucking therapist. I should have arranged therapy for him the day our parents died. What kind of terrible sister am I? I put it on my exhaustingly long mental to-do list.

“I’m not ready for you to die, young man,” I tell him. “Mom would whack me over the head if she saw how skinny you’re getting.”

“Mom can’t see me.”

“Sure she can. From heaven.”

“We don’t believe in heaven, Vivi.”

I pull a face. Sometimes, I wish we were religious. Would it be easier? Would the wounds feel less deep? “I know you miss them. I miss them too. But I feel so bad if I can’t even take care of you. Like they would be super disappointed in me.”

Okay, I don’t think we’re supposed to put so much emotional blackmail on the shoulders of a ten-year-old, but I’ve got very little to work with here.

At least Oliver finally sits up, wiping his nose on his sleeve for a second time, before giving me a guilty look. “I’m sorry.”

I sigh. “It’s okay, sweetie. Just...come have dinner with me, okay?”

“Okay,” he mumbles. “Can I see them? Just quickly?”

“Of course.” With a trembling hand, I pull the pretty gold locket from under my rumpled sweater. It’s a heart-shaped pendant with a shiny surface that Mom gave me for my ninth birthday, but it had been forgotten in a drawer for years. After the accident, I found it again and cleaned it with a handkerchief. I put a small photo of my parents in it, keeping it close to my heart and safe from harm. I never take it off now.

I open the locket, and we just sit there side by side, staring at our parents’ beaming faces for a while.

"They were happy, weren't they?" Ollie mumbles finally.

I ruffle his hair, running my fingers through the messy curls. "Yeah."

When we get down, I fill two plates and put them on the coffee table by the sofa.

"I'll clean up my stuff," Oliver mutters, but I shake my head and pat on a spot on the sofa next to me.

"This is cozy too. Netflix?"

Finally, a smile. My little brother settles next to me, pulls up his knees and nods.

"Hm, let's see." I pretend to browse through the selection of kid's series with a frown. "Bluey?"

"What?"

"Or Peppa Pig? What do kids watch these days?"

"Vivienne," he groans.

"Oh, I know. Thomas the Steam Engine! Yeah, you always loved that!"

"Are you fucking kidding me?"

I choke on my own spit and try to keep a straight face. One of these days, I'll have to have a talk with him about language. Specifically what he can and cannot say when other adults are within hearing distance. "Fine, fine. *Nailed It* it is."

I put on our favourite baking show, where people with the most abominable kitchen skills try to recreate beautiful cakes. The worse they mess up, the funnier it gets.

Satisfied, Oliver settles beside me with his plate balancing dangerously on his lap. We watch in silence for a few minutes.

"I could do it better than that," I remark then, nodding at the caved in chocolate cake on the screen.

"No," Oliver says dryly.

"What, no? At least following a recipe isn't beyond my comprehension skills!"

"And yet your cakes still suck."

"Wow." I pretend to give him a hurt look. "Don't go into the business of motivational speeches."

Oliver grins and shows me his row of teeth, and one black hole where he is losing his baby tooth. I nudge his side with my elbow and for just a little while, things feel like before.

At eight thirty, I gather our plates and silverware and pile them on top of each other in the kitchen sink. "Up you go, Ollie Elephant. Time for bed."

"Not tired," he mutters, rubbing his eyes. I know he's exhausted. Somehow, since we became orphans, even just regular school days feel like they're pulling us apart by our seams. Everything's too much and yet time seems to have come to a sludgy standstill.

"Come on," I tell him, directing him upstairs. "I want your teeth brushed. And wipe that snot off your face."

He grumbles something, but goes into the bathroom anyway. I rummage around a little bit in my own bedroom adjacent to his, until he comes out in his PJs.

"Good," I praise him. I sit with him when he gets into his bed and I even smooth out his duvet once he's settled in. "Do you need a story?"

"But you're terrible at stories."

"Once upon a time there was a boy who became a motivational speaker when he grew up," I retort defiantly. "But he was terrible at it, so no-one hired him, the end."

Oliver snorts, but then his face suddenly falls. "Do you ever think about how when we grow up, Mom and Dad will never know what we'll be?"

My heart gives a horrible lurch. I look down so he doesn't have to witness the pain in my eyes, studying the faded print of dinosaurs on his duvet cover. "Yeah, I do."

"Does it make you sad?"

It makes me feel like I'm being tossed in the paper shredder and then those pieces are thrown into an empty universe. I swallow and nod. "Pretty sad. But I still have you. And you have me, forever."

"Vivi, you won't die, will you?"

"Eventually we all die."

He looks so sad then that I cringe internally. *What the fuck is wrong*

*with me?* I want to dig my nails into my hand and pinch myself so hard it'll bleed as a punishment, but since that would just upset him more, I gently put my hand on his arm. "I'll never leave you alone, Ollie. I promise."

"I won't leave you alone either."

"You'd better not." I lean over and place a kiss on his forehead. "Don't stay up reading too late, okay?"

He nods. I know he'll be up until I go to bed, and I'll see his reading light flash out just before I pass his bedroom door. I never tell him off, though. So the boy likes books. Better than doing drugs, right?

I ignore the dishes when I get downstairs. I know, I know... they'll sit there until they're mouldy if I can't get myself to do them eventually, but I just don't have the energy. It used to be so easy. Fuck, I don't think I ever appreciated how spoiled we were when Mom was still around, because she was the kind of mother that was always rummaging around the house and we never had to lift a finger. To be fair, I was in for a bit of a rough awakening when I left for college and suddenly found myself the only one responsible for cleaning up my messes. It took me half a year to figure out how to keep my tiny little student apartment clean and well kept.

And then the accident happened. I moved back home to stay with Oliver. Put my studies on hold and found a job in a lousy call centre where the heat is always unbearable and the ACs are perpetually broken. I spend my days getting yelled at by frustrated customers, then take the crowded bus back through the city to get groceries before I have to run to pick up Oliver, and when I have finally managed to put him to bed, my body is aching, my mind feels like a dirty wrung out towel and I'm left sitting alone in a living room that's getting dustier and dirtier by the day.

That's it. That's my life. If this is being an adult, I don't know if I'm cut out for it.

I drag my feet through the kitchen and stop in front of the cabinet that's cluttered with unread magazines, my keys, Oliver's gloves that we never put away once summer arrived, and a whole pack of unopened

letters.

“Ugh.” I’ve been dreading this all day. I open the letters one by one, slowly going over the words as I feel the last remains of my energy seep from my body.

*Dear Miss Summers,*

*You have applied for legal custody for Oliver J.M. Summers (10). As per our previous correspondence, you can expect a house visit on the 8th of October at 12:00 PM. We will go over the details of your situation. This will help us determine if this arrangement will be a good fit for both of you.*

*Sincerely,*

*Anna West, child services*

I put the letter down, while telling myself that I shouldn’t be nervous. I’m pretty sure this is just a formality. I’m of age, I have an income (a minimum wage one), and I can...keep house...sort of. All I need to do is clean up a bit, smile prettily and show everyone that I’m fine. I’m *fine*.

I’m not breathing, but I’m fine.

I force myself to finally open the other letters, the ones I’ve been ignoring for weeks. Immediately, I wish I hadn’t. Bills I can barely pay, a mortgage that is really too high for me... Oh God, what if we have to give up this *house*?

Impossible. No. This is home. The last place where I can still sometimes catch a lingering whiff of Mom’s perfume. Where my dad’s study room still has his sticky notes with his scrawled handwriting next to his work PC. Where we have an attic full of trinkets and little things that mom collected over the years. No fucking way we’ll leave this house. I will chain myself to the front door if I have to.

I leave the letters with the rest of the clutter on the kitchen cabinet and settle down on the sofa with a beer from the fridge. I flick through Netflix until my eyelids start drooping, then take myself to bed. As usual, I glance at the picture on the wall above the stairs, but I avoid turning my gaze too long on the closed door of the master bedroom. I’ve gotten good at moving around without looking at that for longer than half a second.

I know I'll have to face what's in there one day, probably sooner than later. It's not like I haven't been in there since the accident, so I know that the bed is neatly made, dad's hiking shoes are placed neatly next to his side of the bed and all their clothes are still in the built-in closet. We can't keep it like that forever, frozen in time. I just...don't want it to change.

Quickly, I wash my face, brush my teeth, weave my dark brown hair in a messy braid to keep it from getting all sweaty during these hot summer nights, then slip into the worn and faded T-shirt I use to sleep in and settle down beneath the cool thin sheets. It really is too hot to sleep covered by anything, but I hate the feeling of being exposed and vulnerable at night.

I think I pass out as soon as my head hits the pillow.



It's one of those days. I mean, it's always *one of those days* lately, but this one just seems to have a bite with a set of extra sharp little teeth. The heat is unbearable at work. We're all cramped in this large hall with low ceilings, grey carpet on the floors and just five narrow windows that can only open to a slit. Sweat has been gathering in the crook of my neck all day and my headset is chafing against my ear. My eyes keep darting to the clock. It's one of those big round ones and it's just audible enough to drive me insane.

*Tick tock, tick tock, tick tock.*

I think that sound is going to haunt my nightmares when I finally get home.

People are yelling at me through my earpiece all day. Can't blame them, really. The company that has hired us to do customer service sucks.

At five minutes to five, I yank off my headset, lean back in my uncomfortable chair and rub my sweaty temples.

*Tick tock, tick tock, tick tock.* Argh.

Somehow, I've made it through another long day, and for once, I'm not running behind on schedule.

I pack my things and I'm about to head out when Jonathan, my senior, pops his head out of his small glass cubicle. It looks like a hot, claustrophobic space, but it's still better than where I've been sitting all day.

"Vivienne, got a minute?"

"I'm on my way out," I say.

"I just want a quick chat."

Quick chat. Sure. With a nasty feeling in my stomach, I step into his office. He offers me a seat and a glass of lukewarm water, but I shake my head. "I need to catch my bus."

"Hm." Jonathan does sit down on his side of the desk and regards me with a look of 'empathy' that makes me want to poke his eyeballs out. "I've noticed that you've been leaving early every day since you started here."

"Well, that's because I have to catch my bus," I answer prickly, placing my weight from one foot to the other.

"There are other buses."

"Sure." I hitch my bag up when it starts to sag off my shoulder. "And there are other people who can pick up my little brother. I've told you before, he's too young to get home alone."

Jonathan nods vaguely. "In this team, we really appreciate teamwork. We're all putting a little extra effort in to provide great customer service for our clients..."

"That's bullshit, Jonathan. Come on. We're all here because we can't be anywhere else."

*Tick tock, tick tock, tick tock.* That fucking clock is still going.

He stares at me through glasses that are slightly foggy, his mouth a little agape, as if he's having trouble registering the words that came out of my mouth. Internally, I cringe. Did I just blow up my only job?

"You haven't been meeting your targets," he finally says. As if to stress his point, he slides two printed spreadsheets in my direction. "Your

phone calls have an average of eight point three minutes. Our target is that all calls take no longer than five.”

“But that’s because it’s impossible to find a solution in under five damn minutes!”

“And if you keep leaving early every day, you miss out on an average of 1300 calls. We can’t afford that, can we?”

I stare at him. Is everyone insane? “No,” I growl finally. “I guess *we* can’t.”

He spreads his hands in a gesture of innocence. “Not my rules, Vivienne.”

“Okay.”

He looks back at me as if he’s expecting something else. An apology, perhaps. I stare back flatly.

“Okay?”

“Sure,” I say. “I’ll keep calls under five minutes from now on.” I guess I’ll just have to end the call mid-conversation, but if that’s what he wants... Fine.

Jonathan frowns a little, as if even his smooth brains are registering that there’s something not quite right about this. But then he nods. “That would be wonderful. That’s all for tonight.”

“Thank you,” *you stupid cabbage brain*. I hurry out of the building, then make a run for the bus stop, but it’s already too late. I can see the headlights of my bus as it turns a corner and drives out of sight.

“Jesus Christ.” I take out my phone and sent a text to Oliver: *missed my bus. Wait on school grounds.*

I wait for the two blue check marks to appear before I put my phone away, and then I wait in the creeping evening darkness for the next bus. Even though the days are still hot and humid, the September evenings are getting darker earlier.

*Tick tock, tick tock, tick tock.*

*How am I still hearing this?*

I stare at the streetlights that switch on one by one, my back leaning against the glass window of the bus stop. My phone gives a buzz.

Oliver: *I’ll wait.*



Poor kid. He must be tired and hungry, and all his other friends will have been picked up by now. I'm such a shitty sister. I have to get my life fixed, so I can fix his.

Finally, the bus comes, and I get on. It's almost twenty-five minutes before I get off at the bus stop nearest to Oliver's school. He's already by the gate and gives me a relieved wave when I hurry towards him.

"Hey." I ruffle his brown curls. "Sorry about that. You okay?"

"Yeah, I'm fine." He hitches his backpack on his shoulders and together, we start making our way through the crisscross of narrow city alleyways back to our house.

"How was today?" I ask.

"Alright," he mumbles.

I give him a sideways glance. "Come on, be honest."

Oliver shrugs. "PE was good."

"Just PE?"

"Everyone's always looking at me funny. Everyone's whispering about what happened, you know. But no one's talking about it."

"They just don't want to upset you," I say, though I know that it wouldn't matter anyway. He's already upset, isn't he?

"I just want to go home," Oliver sighs. "Hey, do you hear that?"

"Hear what?"

"Shh!" He stops to listen. "It's like... a clock or something."

"A clock..." I blink at him. "You hear it too? Man, I thought I was losing my mind today!"

Where the ticking noise had been just a faint, annoying background noise all day, it suddenly occurs to me that it has grown louder, like I'm pressing my ear to a cooking timer.

"It's coming from that way." My brother turns towards a dark little alley on our right, squeezed between two old monumental buildings that house luxury clothing brands or something, annoying music blaring through their open doors. The alley is unlit and there's a strange smell, a little briny. Something in my gut tightens.

"Hey, Oliver, let's go."

He takes three steps inside the alley, as if he didn't hear me. The

ticking noise is so loud now that I stop hearing the music coming from the clothes stores.

“Ollie!” I warn. My intuition is screaming to get away. Why? I don’t know. But my gut feeling has never disappointed me before, so I reach out to grab Oliver’s arm. “Let’s go. There’s nothing here that—”

A terrible noise cuts me off. It’s like the sky explodes around us, or like an airplane crashing right next to us. I feel a stomp in my stomach, a great darkness that wraps around me, lurching me forwards, and then my mind shuts off.



## CHAPTER 2

# Vivienne

SLOWLY, THE DARKNESS RETREATS and I become aware of a stabbing pain in my shoulder. What the hell...?

My ears are still ringing, but that awful ticking noise is gone.  
I'm cold.

Groaning, I push myself up to a sitting position, barely noticing that my hands are not touching the hard cobbled street, but rather digging into soft, wet, leafy underground.

What...happened?

When I open my eyes, I feel a second of panic. Something's wrong with my eyesight, because I can't see anything except a thick white haze.

Then my brain starts functioning again and I realize what I'm truly looking at. Mist. Dark shapes of trees all around me, as far as I can see, which isn't much further than my outstretched arm.

The chill I'm feeling is coming from the muddy forest ground.

I... don't understand what's happening. "Oliver?"

No answer.

I scramble to my feet, pull down the hem of my stupid summer dress, which suddenly feels way too thin, and whip my head from side to side. "Oliver!"

My voice seems to pierce the fog, ricochet off the trees and come back to me like a taunting echo.

"Fuck." I spin around, only to see more trees through the mist. My

heart starts beating a nauseating rhythm. Am I dead? Or is this some kind of fever dream? I remember the loud crash just before everything went black, but there wasn't anything that could have hit us. The alley was too narrow for cars, there was nobody out there but us...

I grab my head, pulling at my hair as I breathe in and out shakily.

"Okay. Fuck. Okay." Oliver has to be here somewhere; he couldn't have gone far, and he would never just leave on his own. I start walking, passing under trees and stumbling over roots as I call for my brother. The harder I cry out his name, the faster my feet go, thumping on the forest floor, and then... something moves in the corner of my eye.

I stop dead, panting, and spin around. "Ollie!"

Something dark glides towards me through the mist. What the fuck is that? It moves like the fog, but it looks like the shape of a person. Or does it? The closer it gets, the more alarm bells go off in my head. Something is so wrong here that my entire system is threatening to crash.

That thing, the shadow, soundlessly approaches me.

I open my mouth, but my voice fails me.

That's not human.

It's not in any category that I know. It's just a *shadow*, with limbs and a head and long fingers that are reaching for me...

I start running again. The thing is close behind me, unhindered by the sweeping branches that are clawing at my dress, my hair, my face. I get the strange sense that my fear is drawing the damned thing even quicker to me, and then, to my horror, more dark shadows are drawing towards me from between the trees, until I only have a very narrow path forward.

I'm dreaming. I'm having a nightmare. This can't be real.

My foot hooks onto something and I stumble to my knees. My hands land flat on the ground.

"*Where is she?*"

The voice that emerges from the shadow scratches my skin like sharp claws. Shadows are everywhere. Dark chilly fingers are touching my arms and before I can even scream, they're all over me, pushing me down, ripping at my dress, with screeching voices.

*"Where is she? Where is she?"*

Mom, dad, this is the end. I hope heaven is real.

My limbs are frozen in horror, but I can't seem to close my eyes to shut out my impending doom. A shadow bends over me, so close I would feel its breath on my face if it had been a living creature.

Suddenly, a flash from behind its dark form nearly blinds me. Like smoke, the shadow dissipates, and from the fog, another shape emerges, towering over me.

Another monster?

Whoever he is, he's holding a burning torch, and he plunges it into another shadow – a violent gesture that makes the dark thing convulse. The strangest thing is that it works. One by one, the nightmarish creatures disappear.

I stare into the mist. Slowly, the dark silhouette of my rescuer steps forward. I catch a glimpse of a long coat, casually hanging loose; my gaze travels from a pair of metal-clad leather boots to gleaming gold buttons, to an outstretched arm covered in dark blue velvet.

I lift my arm to accept his hand, then stop myself short.

Fuck, that's not his *hand*. It's red blood staining the gleaming silver iron of a deadly pointed *hook*.

I snatch my hand back and clumsily manage to scramble to my feet on my own. My dress feels like a wet slug against my legs.

The man plants the torch into the earth and takes a step forward. Automatically, I step back.

He's tall, towering over me even now that I'm upright. His smile is frosty when he looks down on me, his nose a strong curve in a face that is aristocratic, curious and...cruel. His hair looks as dark and soft as the velvet of his coat, though his eyes... My breath hitches for a second as my gaze meets his. His eyes are bright and arctic, like chips of blue diamonds. Blue like forget-me-nots.

"So." His voice is velvety and dark too. "Where is she?"

"Who?" I'm surprised I can even find my voice, even though it sounds weirdly high-pitched and feeble.

He takes another step closer, his unsettling blue eyes studying my face

as if I'm something alien to him.

"Wendy," he replies slowly.

"Who?" I repeat, as confused as I am terrified. Is this man my only chance of getting help, or is he going to gut me with that hook, like he gutted those shadow creatures?

The man smiles, a thin, mocking curl of his lips. "Ah, then perhaps she is gone."

I dare to take my eyes off him for one moment as I glance around at the foggy forest. "I don't know. I'm just looking for my brother."

Oh shit, oh my god, Oliver. He's all alone out here; maybe those shadow fuckers have already caught him. I have to find him *now*.

"A brother?" One of his dark eyebrows lifts. "A boy?"

"No, a squirrel. Of course a boy, what else? He was right next to me, and I... I lost him."

"A lost boy." His slight, mocking smile sends a chill across my skin.

Subtly, I try to edge away from him. "I have to go."

Quick as lighting, his hand grabs my arm. A hand, not a hook, but that's only a little relief.

"Not even a thank you, darling? I believe you underestimate what those shadows would have done to you, had I not stepped in."

"Jesus, let go of me!" My heart starts pounding at an alarming rate as his fingers squeeze into my flesh hard.

"What are you? Hm?" Despite my attempts at pulling away, he easily retains his hold on me, even tugging me a little closer. He looks down at me, his long, dark curls tumbling past his face. "*Who* are you?"

"I... I'm no one!" It's hard to struggle against such a commanding grip. "Nobody important."

"Why do I doubt that is true?"

"Why would I know? You're hurting me!" I take a shaky breath. "*Thank you*, for saving me. Okay? Now please, leave me the hell alone."

"My dear girl, you seem awfully lost yourself."

"Then tell me where the hell I am!" My gut is screaming at me that this man is as dangerous as those shadows; perhaps even worse.

"Certainly." His voice caresses my skin like a soft feather. He lifts

his terrible hook and places the cold tip right under my chin. He's not applying much pressure, but the suggestion of the sharp iron against my skin is enough to make me freeze. "I do not know what you are or why you have the ill fortune to stumble into my arms," he muses quietly. "But, dear girl, I'm afraid your luck has run out. Welcome to your own hollow grave."

"What?" I whisper.

"I cannot say why he lets you wander about Neverland so close after a Never Night. You may run, certainly, but you shall never leave again."

I twist my arm as hard as I can in an attempt to break free from his grip. "Let go of me!"

Neverland...? Says the man with a fucking *hook* for a hand?

What the actual fuck is going on?

This is definitively a weird dream, right? Or someone is pranking me. Who, I have no idea, because I don't know anyone who would be this cruel... or this rich, for that matter. I guess there could be hidden camera's somewhere in this forest. If this turns out to be some sort of sordid fucked up prank show, I am going to sue the living daylights out of them. Guaranteed.

I lift my eyes to his frosty, curious gaze and say as calmly as I can: "I'm going to find my brother now. Thank you and goodbye."

"That boy has no chance in the world. But you, my dear girl, could be spared further suffering. Let me invite you..."

"To what?" I ask suspiciously.

His smile is unsettling. "I have a ship, far away from these shadows and this forest. You are welcome aboard..." Again his eyes sweep over my face, then seem to drop lower, pausing briefly on my chest before meeting mine again. "My dear lady."

I don't know if I'm awake or dreaming. I don't know if this man is who I think he is, or how that would even be possible. But my gut is telling me one thing: there's a darkness within him that cannot be good for me. Even if he were the only living soul around, I'd still be better off far away from him.

"I'm not your lady," I snap, before I twist my arm in his grip while at

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the same time jabbing my other elbow hard into his muscled stomach. His surprise lasts just long enough that I can pull myself free.

Before he can grab me again, I turn and start running, the dense trees quickly swallowing me up.





## CHAPTER 3

# Vivienne

THE MIST CLINGS TO the forest like a shroud, wrapping itself around the gnarled branches as if trying to smother them. I tread carefully, my heart pounding in my chest, each step threatening to betray me to those shadow creatures...

What were they? Ghosts? Demons? Mirages? Whatever they were, I don't want to run into them again. And who knows what else lurks out here. All I can think about is Oliver. If he's not safe under a thicket somewhere, I swear to God, I'll...

Well...I don't know. My mind just blanks whenever I reach that point. He has to be okay.

Eventually, the mist starts to dissolve, and sunlight chases away the gloom. Thorny vines wrap around my ankles, nasty little thorns prick into my arms, something tangles in my hair and I have to fumble myself free with a pained hiss. At least the forest looks a little less wicked now that sunbeams are streaming past the leaves. I start to notice things: thimbleweed and lilies of the field covering the forest floor like a sweet-smelling blanket, and the most pristine little brook gurgling across rocks and boulders that are covered with star shaped mosses.

I stop, my dry mouth drawing me to the stream. This water looks clearer than my own tap water. I scoop up a handful, bringing it to my lips, but then a deep gut instinct suddenly stops me.

I can't tell what it is. I'm thirsty and this water is cool and fresh, it's

shimmering in the sunlight. It just... It looks too perfect.

Like a sweet little trap, waiting to snap around me.

Oh, God. Maybe I'm being an idiot, but then again, what do I know about this place? Jack shit, that's what.

*Neverland*, the man said... The man with the hook. I'd laugh if I wasn't so scared.

Just when I get back to my feet, I hear something.

Laughter, bright and high pitched, like... Like little kids. In a place like this? My skin prickles with unease. But if there are kids, maybe there are adults; people who can help me find Oliver, people who can help me make sense of this place.

As I emerge from a particularly dense thicket, I'm confronted with a sight that leaves me dumbstruck.

Boys. Ragged, wild-looking creatures. They're soaring between the trees, propelled by some invisible force. Their laughter rings out, echoing through the forest, and my spine tingles with unpleasant needle pricks.

They look like little kids, but Jesus, they don't seem entirely human, not with the way they defy gravity, their ragged clothes fluttering in the air like bat wings.

Someone whoops and my gaze snaps up to a cedar tree. A small figure balances on the end of a high branch, his dark hair tousled by the wind, and my heart leaps into my throat. "Oliver!"

As if compelled by some unseen force, every child in the sky halts mid-flight, turning to stare at me with wide, unblinking eyes.

I ignore them, dashing towards the tree as fast as I can while the blood thunders in my ears. "Oliver! Have you gone mad? Get down from there!"

"Vivienne?" Oliver's voice is faint. He looks down at me, his brown eyes clouded with confusion.

"I said, get down!" What the fuck is he even doing up there? Who told him to climb that tree?

Oliver sways on the branch, suddenly looking a lot less confident. "Uh...Vivi!"

“Grab something!” I yell.

His hands flail for grip, and then... My breath catches as he tumbles toward the ground, arms flailing, and I lunge forward without thinking, driven by pure instinct.

We land in a tangled heap of limbs and leaves, the impact knocking the breath out of me. We’re coughing, wheezing and spluttering as Oliver scrambles off of me.

“Vivi... You’re here.”

“Of course I’m here,” I wheeze. “What the fuck are you doing? I’ve been looking all over for you!”

He blinks at me, his expression caught somewhere between disbelief and wonder, and then he grins; a wild, reckless smile that makes me stare at him. “I knew you’d come here too.”

“What the hell?” I reply, as my hands tremble with adrenaline. “You were gone, you little shit! I lost you! Do you know how fucking terrified I was? And here you are, climbing trees like you’re a goddamn circus monkey!” Suddenly seething, I get to my feet and grab his arm. “We’re getting out of here, before anything else weird happens.”

“Good luck with that,” a voice pipes up from above us, and I look up to see the flying children watching us with unabashed curiosity. “This place is nothing but weird.”

A gust of wind sends leaves swirling around me, and I step back as a figure swoops down from the trees, landing gracefully. The boy stands before us, his blond hair tousled and his eyes alight with mischief. The children fall silent, their gazes fixed on him in a mixture of awe and trepidation.

“Welcome to Neverland!” he announces grandly, spreading his arms wide as if to embrace the entire forest. “I’m Peter Pan and these are my Lost Boys.”

Peter.

Pan.

*The Peter Pan.* The one from the stories?

Insane. That’s fucking insane and my head can’t accept it. “Where are the hidden cameras?” I grumble. “Peter Pan?”

“Ah,” he says, circling around me like a predator sizing up its prey. “Wendy goes and what do we get? A grown-up girl. How very...intriguing.”

“I don’t know anything about that.” To my own annoyance, I shuffle a step away from him. “But I’ll be happy to leave.”

“Oh, you can’t leave, Vivienne.”

I tense up. “How do you know my name?”

“Didn’t your brother just call you that?” He chuckles, shaking his head as if I’ve amused him greatly. “Well, no matter. You’re here now, and that’s... Well, it’s fine.”

“You want something from me?” I ask cautiously, and I pull Oliver closer to me.

“Want?” he repeats. “Not at all. Except, perhaps, a little company. You see, we could use someone like you, Vivienne. Someone to look after us, to mend our clothes and tell us stories by the fire. A mother, if you will.”

“A mother?” I snort. This is getting too good. Or rather, too weird. If this *is* some twisted candid camera show, they sure are leaning into the theme. “Do I look like a mother to you?”

“Perhaps not,” he concedes, eyeing me thoughtfully. “But appearances can be deceiving, can’t they? Just look at me. I’m just a boy, and yet I hold the power of life and death in my hands.”

That’s the creepiest thing I’ve ever heard. I wreck my brain, trying to remember what I know about the Peter Pan story. Wasn’t it something about him being dragged to Neverland by fairies when he was a baby? Or something about...leaving his parents and running away from home?

“If you wanted a mother, you shouldn’t have abandoned her,” I snap.

His smile freezes. Shadows enter his eyes, chilling my core. This is not a child. No, there’s nothing childlike about the way he regards me, his head cocked slightly to the side like a creepy demon from a horror movie.

“Perhaps,” he smirks. “Or perhaps not. But know this, Vivienne: as long as you are with me, you and your brother will be safe from all the Shadows, fairies, mermaids, and pirates that live here.”

*Nothing here is safe.*

“Those shadows. What are they?”

“Well, they’re Shadows. Did they bother you?”

A shiver runs through me. “So they don’t come here?”

“Only if I want them here.” He shows me a feral grin before hopping back and gracefully launching himself into the air, without taking his eyes off me. “I told you. I’m king.”

“Then I’m sure you know the way out!” I shout after him.

He just laughs. “Come with me, mother!”

*Mother my ass.* I watch Peter Pan glide effortlessly through the air. His laughter is intoxicating, wild and free, but it does little to comfort me, especially when the other children leap from their branches, their small bodies suspended for a moment before they’re snatched up by invisible currents.

“He said I can do that too,” Oliver says excitedly, before pulling free from my arms. “He said he’ll let me fly.”

“No...!” I start, but he’s already scurrying up a tree like a little squirrel, reaching the first branch that will allow him to leap off.

“Vivi! Watch me!” Oliver shouts, his face lit up by excitement. My breath catches in my throat when he leaps, only to be carried back up into the air.

“Ollie, be careful!” I call out, my voice barely audible over the sound of the boys’ raucous laughter and Peter’s mocking jeers.

“Careful?” Peter scoffs, swooping down next to me in a gust of wind. “Where’s the fun in that?”

As if to emphasize his point, he flicks his wrist, and the smallest of the boys suddenly plummets from the sky, screaming in terror until Peter casually summons another gust of wind to catch him just before he crashes into the ground.

“See?” Peter smirks. “All part of the game.”

“Are you insane?” I yelp. “You’ll kill someone!”

He looks back at me with dark eyes. “I gave your brother Fairy Dust too. He’ll have so much fun.”

A sick feeling starts churning in my stomach. “He doesn’t need Fairy Dust. He needs to go home.”

“Everyone needs Fairy Dust to fly, Vivienne. It’s my only rule.”

“You have a rule about flying?”

“Look.” Peter points up. “He’s laughing. Don’t you want him to have fun?”

*Not this kind of fun.* I watch Ollie swerve and then notice the smaller child, no more than a toddler really, move through the air unsteadily. “Are you sure he’s okay?”

“Of course,” Peter replies dismissively, already losing interest in the conversation. “He’ll forget all about it in no time.”

As he takes to the sky once more, a chill settles over my heart. I’ve found Oliver, yes – but now what? I wonder if we were in an accident back home, and I’m in some kind of coma induced fever dream. This place is a fairy tale gone wrong... I need to get Ollie out of here.

“Vivi!” Oliver calls out, soaring through the air. “This is fun! Come on, we’re waiting for you!”

“Fun,” I whisper, the word tasting foul on my tongue. This is as much fun as finding a clown in your closet.



Seeing no other choice, I follow Peter Pan and the children through a hole under a huge, ancient tree. A twisting ladder of rope and tree roots leads us deep underground, where the air is thick and musty, and I can taste the damp earth on the tip of my tongue.

“Welcome home,” Peter announces with a flourish, clearly expecting us to be awed by the sprawling labyrinth of tunnels and chambers beneath the tree. But as I take in the dimly lit space, all I feel is unease. Something’s rotting down here, clinging to everything like a fine layer of dust. I take in cracked bowls and plates piled high on a rickety table, cobwebs clinging to their edges, mismatched cutlery and faded, threadbare dolls that sag on chairs scattered around the place.

“Oliver,” I say quietly, taking him by the arm again. “I think we should find somewhere else to stay. Someplace... more private.”

"Where?" he asks. "Peter said Neverland changes at night. We shouldn't go out there after dark."

Thinking of those clawing, hissing Shadows sends a shiver down my spine. "Then we should leave before it gets dark. Find the place we came from and see if we can get back..."

"Okay," Oliver mutters, but then something shifts in his eyes. It's like a thin film clouds his pupils.

"Tomorrow. I want to play now."

"Play?" I stare at him in bewilderment. "Oliver, do you not understand how fucked up this situation is?!"

A furrow settles between his eyebrows. "I do. But he makes me fly."

"At least eat something," Peter's voice sounds from behind us.

I almost yelp. How did he just slither up on us without a peep?

"You must be hungry. My boys are. We haven't eaten a cooked meal in days."

"Then cook something," I reply irritably.

"Oh, they can't cook." He shrugs his slim shoulders. "No one taught them."

"Please cook for us," the smallest of the boys chimes up, approaching us from a little sideways corridor. "Just once?"

"I'm not your friggin' mother!" I snarl, but immediately regret my harsh tone when tears pop into the kid's eyes. How old is he anyway...? Five? Jesus Christ, I can't abandon a literal toddler. Gritting my teeth, I concede: "One evening. But only one, capice?"

I nearly teeter over when the child leaps forward and throws itself into my arms, his runny nose smearing snot all over my dress. Ugh. He's smelly too. I wouldn't be surprised if he had fleas. He feels so skinny as he presses himself against me, like a little street cat desperate for some affection. What kind of creepy game is this Peter Pan playing here? And... What happens to those who are not willing to play?



## CHAPTER 4

# Vivienne

THE BOYS RUN AROUND like mice in their burrow, their bare feet thundering against the hard earth as they disappear into the labyrinth of tunnels before us.

The kitchen –if I can even call it that –is a disaster. Pots and pans are scattered everywhere, some crusted with what I can only hope is food. A small fire crackles in a pit in the centre of the room, casting flickering shadows on the walls. I spot a cauldron half-buried in the ashes and drag it out, wincing as soot smudges my hands.

“Why did no one teach you?” I mutter aloud, only to realize the smallest boy is hovering behind me, watching me with wide eyes.

“Peter says we don’t need to eat that often.”

“Bullshit. You’re skinnier than a rat.” If Peter is too stupid to at least feed his boys, I’ll have to do it. Though my confidence wavers when I realize I have no idea what kind of food they have here. The boy leads me to a storage room that is only partially filled with dusty apples, a few hard nuts and roots that smell faintly sweet.

A scrawny boy with springy hair stares at me, revealing a set of pearly white teeth when he notices me glancing at him.

“So...” Man, little kids make me uncomfortable. “What’s your name?”

“Nibbs.”

“Okay. What’s your real name?”