



NEVER, NEVER
LET THEM WIN.

THE
FAE
PRINCES

NIKKI ST. CROWE

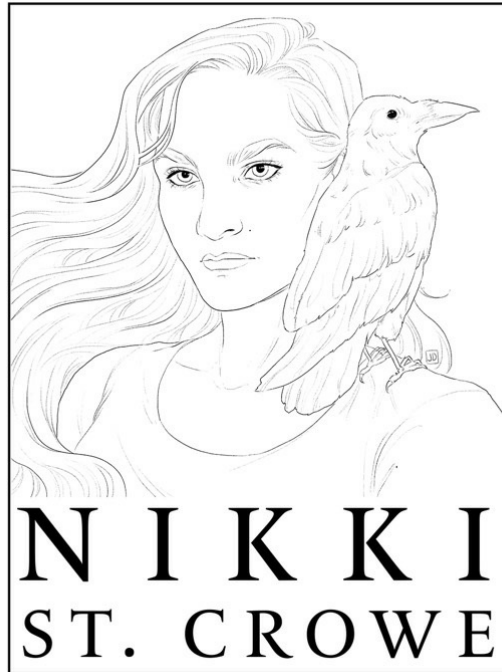
THE
FAE
PRINCES

VICIOUS LOST BOYS BOOK FOUR

NIKKI ST. CROWE



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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This book would not be possible without the help of several readers.

We can all agree that in the original *Peter and Wendy*, the depiction of Native characters was extremely problematic. When I set out to do a Peter Pan retelling, it was important to me to keep the Native presence on the island, but it was of the utmost importance that it be done in the right way.

I have to thank several sensitivity readers for helping me portray the twins and their family stories in the *Vicious Lost Boys* series in a way that was accurate and respectful to the Native culture, even if the twins reside in a fantasy world. This was especially important in book four when we visit the fae and dive deeper into the twins' backstory.

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Any mistakes or inaccuracies that remain in this book are entirely my own.

BEFORE YOU READ

The Vicious Lost Boys Series is a dark romantic reimagining of *Peter and Wendy*. All characters have been aged up and are 18 and over. This is not a children's book and the characters are not children.

Some of the content in this book may be triggering for some readers. If you'd like to learn more about CWs in Nikki's work, please visit her website:

<https://www.nikkiscrowe.com/content-warnings>

To all the girls who know the sound of a silent scream.

“Peter was not quite like other boys; but he was afraid at last. A tremor ran through him, like a shudder passing over the sea; but on the sea one shudder follows another till there are hundreds of them...”

— J.M. BARRIE

PROLOGUE

THE MOTHER

THE MOTHER IS BAREFOOT, THE CHILD SQUALLING IN HER ARMS.

He is a troublesome boy, restless and hard to please.

Mischievous too. This she knows without having known him long. He is only two weeks old, but that is long enough.

She knew he would be trouble the moment she gave birth to him.

Out of all her children, his birth was the hardest, the labor intense, painful and drawn out.

Now, the cool sand of the beach squeaks beneath her feet as she makes her way to the water's edge. The night is sharp but warm, the stars bright, and she turns her face toward the universe and smiles at all of them.

Then the baby wails.

He has no voice yet, only complaints, and he likes to make them known.

Pay attention to me, his cries say. For I am most important.

Mischievous and arrogant.

If she keeps him and gives him a place among her other children, he will destroy them all.

She knows this as readily as she knows his nature, and there is nothing more to be done for either.

It's him or them.

It is the only way.

And yet it makes her chest ache.

To abandon one child to save the others. Maybe one day he will learn to not be so volatile, but she can't allow him to learn it with her.

Using a giant curled leaf she plucked from the forest foliage, she places it on the water's surface, creating a makeshift raft. She's heard the waters of the lagoon can be healing, and maybe they can heal his troublesome streak.

It's the least she can do. The only chance she can give him.

She lays the babe down. The leaf sinks, water jetting in around him, and he wails louder, shivering.

"I'm sorry," she tells him, and then gives him a push, and the water carries him away.

PETER PAN

THIS MUST BE A WAKING SLEEP. MORE NIGHTMARE THAN DREAM.

When I slept in my tomb, sometimes I would wake to its total, silent darkness and wonder if I was still caught in the sleepworld. Perhaps this is that, but instead of darkness, there is golden light.

It's the only sensible answer.

Tinker Bell is dead. Killed by me.

There is no way she's standing on my balcony, speaking my name.

Hello, Peter Pan.

An eternity passes in an instant.

Tinker Bell's wings flutter behind her. She is the same age she was when I killed her, immortal and ageless, more beautiful than any corpse has a right to be.

She's wearing the same dress she wore that night, when I spoke the unspeakable words to her. The dress made to look like skeleton leaves, cut square across her chest, jagged at the knees. Fairy dust swirls around her and coats the balcony's railing, making it glitter in the graying light.

"Tink."

I haven't spoken her name in a long time and the syllables feel like a curse on my lips.

"Tinker Bell."

She smiles at me and my breath hitches.

"It's so good to see you," she says.

"How are you here?"

Her hands take up a fold of her dress and she bends her body into a demure S-curve. She flutters her eyelashes at me. "Did you miss me,

Peter?”

My stomach sours.

I can't do this.

She can't be here.

Darling can't see her and the twins can't know she's alive and Vane... well, I know what Vane would say.

Get rid of her.

“How are you here, Tink?” I ask again.

I have to know the magic that brought her here, if it's the island punishing me again. If it's Tilly fucking with me. Maybe Roc? Does Roc have this power to deceive?

The panic rises like fire in my throat.

I have to get rid of her.

“The island brought me back,” she answers and takes a step toward me. I step back and she pouts.

There was a time when I would have relented to Tink. I gave her anything she wanted. She was the only friend I had and I was terrified of having none.

“I think I must be a gift for you and my sons and the court,” she says. She flutters her wings and fairy dust catches an eddy of wind, swirling around me. “A little light for your darkness.”

A cold sweat breaks out down my neck.

The whispers of the spirits in the lagoon come back to me.

Drenched in darkness, terrified of light.

But this? This must be some kind of fucking joke.

Tink might appear shining with light, but she always embodied the dark. I think that's why we got along so well. We saw in each other something we rarely saw in others. The willingness to get the dirty work done. And sometimes we did the dirty work just because it was fun.

What lesson are the spirits trying to teach me now?

How many hoops must I jump through?

When will it end?

Get rid of her.

I can hear Vane in the back of my head now. A means to an end. Whatever this is, it can only lead to more trouble and I'm tired of trouble. I want quiet for once. I want to breathe. I want to enjoy my shadow. I want Darling in my arms. I want...

I want to be at peace.

The thought catches me off guard. It's so unexpected that something burns in my sinuses, something that must be tears.

I want to lie still and not have to worry anymore.

I have the shadow back. Do I really have to play the same game?

No. I'm not fucking doing it.

One more dark deed for peace will be worth it and the spirits will know
I am no longer dancing for them, whatever sick joke this is.

I take a breath and then speak the words I swore I would never speak:

"I don't believe in fairies," I say.

The words practically burn on my tongue, more than the first time I
spoke them and watched Tink die right before my eyes.

Except...this time, she smiles at me and hangs her head back and
laughs.

ROC

SMEE FINDS ME AT THE BAR, POURING A SHOT OF THE CAPTAIN'S BEST RUM. As the dark liquor fills up the glass, it perfumes the air with spice and smoke.

"You're awake," she says.

"And you sound positively excited to see me." I meet her eyes in the reflection in the mirror over the bar. There is dried blood still smeared across my face, covering my tattered shirt. The Captain didn't bother to give me a fresh set of clothes.

I have a solid guess as to why he let me lie in a mess of my own making.

"You told him, didn't you?" I say to Smee. "And he left for Everland."

One perk of the beast gorging itself is that afterward, my intuition is especially good, my senses especially heightened. And I don't sense the Captain now. When I search for him in my sphere of awareness, there is nothing but a void.

Smee doesn't answer so I goad her some more.

"He left and he didn't take you with him?" I tsk-tsk.

She crosses her arms over her chest. Sunlight pours in through the leaded glass windows over her shoulder, rimming her in sharp golden light. I don't know what time it is—Hook's house is absent timepieces and I seem to have misplaced my pocket watch. But I'd guess it's a little after nine a.m. When did I feed last? How long have I been out? For someone of my kind, a typical feast could render one unconscious for days. But this wasn't a typical feast and I am not a typical man.

"Yes, I told Jas," Smee says. "He went after her and I chose to stay."

She and I both know there's more to that story, but I don't really give a fuck what petty squabbles they have going on between them. I just need to know how it affects me. And there is only one part of that statement that has any bearing on my future.

He went after her.

Wendy Darling.

If he finds her first, I will strip the flesh from his bones.

I sling the glass back and drink down the liquor. The burn of the alcohol helps hold the spark of anger at bay. The Captain is gone and now I need a plan. No sense losing my goddamn mind like a stupid little shit.

"How long ago?" I ask Smee.

She cocks out a hip, arms still crossed. "Tell me what you'd do to him if you found him first?"

"Does it really matter if I tell you the truth or a lie? I don't know if you'd believe either."

"I'll know."

"All right." I pour another shot and turn around to face her. "The truth is, I'm not sure yet. Circumstance changes the answer. But I'll probably stab him just for fun."

Smee's expression does not change for several long seconds. I love this woman's ability to give nothing away. I've never used the word *stony* to describe a woman, but Smee could be a marble statue if she just put a little more effort into it.

After a beat, she approaches and takes the glass from my hand and sets it down on the bar, even though I've barely had my fill.

"You want to know what I think about you?" she asks.

"Not particularly."

"I think that you care very little for most things."

I gaze down at her, trying to gauge her angle. I sense pity, and pity I do not like.

"I think you care very little," she goes on, "because you think that keeps you safe. If you care for very little, you have very little to lose."

A knot forms between my shoulder blades, making me shift again.

"But you know what?" Smee says. "Caring for so little means that when you actually do care, losing it has a much higher cost."

The knot tightens until I can feel it in my chest. Instinct is trying to get me to dance out of her reach, but I will show no weakness to a pirate such as Smee.

"So go on," she says. "Threaten Jas's life to the one person who nearly killed the one thing you actually *do* care about."

We stare at one another for several long seconds. The house is silent, and we are silent, but our silence says a great many things.

“I like you, Smee,” I tell her. “But you threaten my brother again and it’ll be the last. I’m no artist, but I’m an expert at violence and I will paint a fucking masterpiece with your blood.” I smile and pick up the glass, emptying the drink into my mouth, keeping my gaze on her the entire time.

When I return the glass to the bar top, it clunks loudly. Smee’s right eye flinches, but it’s the only tell she’s got.

“Do us both a favor and leave Vane out of it.”

“Do us both a favor and don’t stab Jas.”

“I don’t know why you care. He abandoned you.”

“I don’t know why you care about a Darling girl who you haven’t seen in years and years and years.”

The knot in my chest tightens, crowding out my heart.

“Because I’m a possessive prick,” I tell her. “I don’t even have to like the thing. Or the girl, as the case may be. What’s mine is mine, and once it’s mine, it cannot be someone else’s.”

“It’s almost sad, this story you’re telling yourself,” she says. “And I pity Wendy Darling for it.”

Dark clouds roll in, blotting out the sun. The air turns frigid. An odd thing, for Neverland.

Smee glances at the shift in weather and then quickly back at me. “Time for you to go, Crocodile. Have fun on your quest for destroying everything you touch. When you’re done, I suspect you’ll be standing on nothing but a pile of bones and ash. I hope it’s worth it.” She tips her head toward the door, indicating my dismissal.

“Do you know where she is?” I keep my voice level, give nothing away.

“So you can destroy her too?”

I pull in a deep breath, nostrils flaring. “Would you like a play by play? Do you want to know where I’ll stick my cock, how I’ll make her scream my name? Destroying something can feel good, Smee. I promise you that.”

“You are hopeless,” she says.

“Aren’t we all in this godforsaken island chain?” I may be a little drunk now. Sometimes after a gorging, my insides don’t work quite the same way. Liquor can go straight to my head. I’m not usually so pessimistic.

Smee sighs. “I lost track of Wendy Darling a long time ago. Jas has no more information than you do.” She walks back to the door and pulls it open. There’s dirt crusted on the wood frame, the door handle rubbed

clean of its gold plating. Why would the Captain let it go when he is so fucking anal about appearances?

Because he never came in and out this door, I realize. This door was for the pirates, the degenerates. *Well played, Smee.*

But if there's one thing I know, it's how to be whatever someone wants me to be long enough to let their guard down.

And then I eat them.

"Goodbye, Smee."

Her farewell is the hard slam of the door in my face.

I start off down the path.

Time for plan B.

WINNIE

I WAKE FREEZING. SINCE COMING TO NEVERLAND, IT'S BEEN A WARM, tropical place. Never cold like this.

I can sense the heat of the boys around me. Vane, the solid line of him at my back, his arm tight across my middle. Bash in front of me, my legs tangled with his. Kas at the other end of the bed, his hand locked around my ankle.

And yet...*goosebumps*.

I open my eyes to the early morning light, the first rays of sunshine spilling through the open windows of my bedroom.

Except the light is diluted, more gray than orange.

And...is that falling snow?

I sit up on my elbow. Vane groans behind me. Bash reaches out for me. "Too early, Darling," he mumbles. "Come back to bed."

"Does it ever snow in Neverland?" I ask.

Thick flakes swirl in the light and when the wind shifts, they spill into the room through the open window, melting into tiny puddles on the floor.

Bash's dark brow furrows. "Never."

"Well, it's snowing. Right now."

His eyes pop open. His frown deepens as he looks up at me, the sleep fading from his gaze.

Then he darts upright and checks the window. "The fuck?"

"What's going on?" Kas asks, his voice muzzy with sleep.

Pressure builds in my chest. It takes me a second to recognize that old feeling of dread. I grew up full of it. It haunted me like a ghost, stretching across blank walls, hiding in dark corners. Panic sets in before I can

analyze where it's all coming from, why it's here.

I'm a child again, hiding from boogeymen, frightened for what the future will bring, terrified of madness.

My breathing quickens.

Vane sits up behind me, presses the warmth of his chest against me. "You're all right, Win." His voice is dark and heavy at my ear and my stomach pinwheels.

Now that Vane and I share the Neverland Death Shadow, there is no hiding from him. He knows everything I feel. Everything I fear.

I don't know why that knowledge makes tears burn at my eyes.

Haven't I always yearned for love? To be protected and cared for?

So why do I feel so damn vulnerable? His intimate knowledge of my weaknesses chaffs like new wool.

"Something is wrong," I tell him.

Kas gets out of the bed and makes his way to the bank of windows. His breath condenses in the air.

The dread grows.

"Where is Peter Pan?" I ask.

We look around the room, finally noticing his absence. Did he run to his tomb? Are we too much for him? Am *I* too much for him?

Scooting off the edge of the bed, I meet Kas at the windows. His hair is loose, spilling over his shoulders, and the wind catches a length of it, billowing it around us like a curtain of dark silk. It tickles my bare shoulder.

Outside, Neverland is covered in a blanket of fine snow, and beyond the house, the beach is gray, the waves crashing against the shore.

The dread winds around my ribs like a snake.

I look up at Kas. "Have you ever seen Neverland like this?"

His eyes are narrowed on the horizon, brow furrowed. "Never," he admits.

"What does it mean?"

And then I hear it, the distant sound of fighting. And there in the woods, a flash of golden light.

I know it's Pan.

I'm in only a tank top and panties, so I yank on the first piece of clothing I can find—a pair of cut-off shorts. Bash is already out the door and I follow him through the loft and across the balcony and down the stairs.

The seagulls squawk in the distance, and the waves roar on the beach.

The dread beats at my breastbone.

Something is wrong.
Something is wrong.
The dread isn't mine.

I realize that now as I cross the backyard, the snow biting against my bare feet, numbing my toes.

The dread is Peter Pan's and somehow I can feel it thumping across the roots of Neverland.

Something is very, *very* wrong.

And when Bash and I come to a clearing in the woods, we find Peter Pan is not alone.

"Holy fucking shit," Bash breathes out.

There is a woman with a shining black blade at Peter Pan's throat. She's got him pressed against the thick trunk of an oak tree. Blood trickles from a break in his skin, and it runs down his naked chest.

"Who is that?" I ask Bash. "What do you want?" I ask her.

And then she turns to me, full lips pulling back into a wide smile.

And I know right away, because I've seen her in a vision, the one where she killed my ancestor, the original Darling.

"Tinker Bell."

She steps back from Pan and with a flick of her wrist, the knife disappears. "What a pleasure to meet you, Winnie Darling."

Her wings flutter, lifting her from the forest floor. She holds herself aloft just a few feet in the air as golden dust swirls around her, driving away the gloomy grayness to the morning.

"This can't be real," Bash says.

"My handsome boy." Tinker Bell flies over to him. He stumbles back.

"Don't come near me."

She pushes out her thin bottom lip. "Is that any way to greet your mother after so many years?"

"There's no fucking way." Bash straightens his spine. "This is a fucking joke. Is Tilly doing this?" He scans the nearby forest. "Enough, sister. This isn't funny!"

Tinker Bell comes back to the ground and her wings go still. She takes a step toward Bash, but I cut her off.

"You heard him," I tell her.

She's a few inches taller than I am, but I have half the Neverland Shadow, and there's no way I'm backing down.

"Darling girl." She holds out her hands to display her innocence. "I merely miss my son. Can a mother not embrace him after spending half an eternity in the dark?" She sends a pointed look at Peter Pan and his jaw