

## The Greatest Adventure

*It was time.*

*It was finally time!*

Wendy jumped giddily in the ticket line. She'd even worn her favourite dress for the occasion, layers of baby blue cotton and white frills bouncing and twirling with each movement, mimicking the movement of her caramel curls, which were tied up in a bow with a strip of spare blue fabric left over from when Mrs. Darling had made her the dress a year ago. She peered around her mother towards the tent awaiting them, its name in bright lights piercing through the night.

*Neverland Circus.*

Her feet were pacing in place, her hands nearly shaking holding the brownie camera she'd begged her mother to be allowed to bring. It'd been seven years since the last time the circus had visited London, and Wendy had been just five years old then, too young to remember anything past the awe she'd felt. She squealed in anticipation, and her mother chuckled and stroked her hair before hugging her close.

"That excited?"

"Of course, mama! It's been so long since the last time! Why, John was just an infant, and Michael hadn't even been born!"

The said brothers were just as impatient, peeking over one another from where Mr. Darling held them back from racing towards the tent before they could get their tickets.

"Well, best clear some headspace before the show. You'll need it to remember everything. Who knows when they'll visit again?"

"Oh, I plan to write everything in my diary when I get home, papa! And take plenty of pictures too!" Wendy held up the camera with an uncontainable smile.

"Here, why don't you all go take some pictures by the tent, I'll get us the tickets and meet you at the entrance," Mr. Darling nodded over at the tent.

The children's eyes lit up with glee. They called out a thank you as they raced off with the camera, Mrs. Darling chuckling and trailing after them. Mr. Darling moved up in line and reached the ticket counter.

"Sorry, sir, we've just run out of seats," the ticket vendor frowned.

"What? Surely not, that tent is enormous, and there's still a long line behind us!" Mr. Darling furrowed his brow.

"There is, and I apologise for the inconvenience, but given the long duration since the last time the circus came, there were a lot of folks who paid in advance for reserved seats, so we had less to sell at the gate. You are free to come the next time we visit."

"But that could take another seven years!"

"I really do apologise, sir, there's nothing I can do."

Some of the people behind the Darling's, overhearing the conversation, groaned and exclaimed frustrations, but with no other choice, began to dissipate. Mr. Darling glanced back at the kids excitedly posing in front of the tent as his wife took their pictures and looked back.

“Please, surely there’s somewhere you can squeeze us in. The kids can sit on our laps, we just need two seats.”

“I’m sorry, sir, there’s just no more seats-”

“Oh? If I recall correctly, the VIP section has a few no shows, doesn’t it?” A voice sounded from behind him.

Mr. Darling turned to face a young man dressed sharply in a pine green suit, with a matching alpine hat atop scruffy, ginger locks, the red feather on its side seemingly glowing in the light of the torches by the ticket booth. An irresistible smile sat plastered across his handsome features. The ticket vendor immediately bowed.

“Sir, what are you doing here?”

“Oh, I just enjoy strolls before the show, and it looks like it’s a good thing I do. Otherwise, I never would have run into this lovely gentleman here.” He turned to Mr. Darling and gave a bow. “Pleasure, the name is Peter Pan, I’m the owner and ringmaster of Neverland Circus.” His voice had such a pleasant lilt, Mr. Darling was convinced he could convince a rabid dog from a steaming steak.

“George Darling.” He returned the bow. “I’m here with my wife and kids; they were really looking forward to the show, but…” Mr. Darling glanced at his family, still preoccupied by their pictures to notice him or his company. Mr. Pan followed his gaze.

“No more seats, hm? Well like I said, the VIP section has more than enough seats for you fine folks, and what kind of entertainer would I be if I let down such wonderful children?”

“Really?” Mr. Darling asked, “I don’t want to take advantage of your kindness-”

“No, please, I insist.”

“Do you think he’ll win, mama?” Wendy asked.

“Who, sweetheart?”

“Mr. Pan! He’s got to, right? I mean, surely he can’t lose to some dirty pirates!”

“Oh, darling, just for that, I’ll make sure I win over that vicious Captain Hook.”

The children gasped, Wendy the loudest among them, as they turned around to face the man who’d approached them.

“Mr. Pan!” The children called in unison, rushing over.

Mr. Pan chuckled as he stepped closer, “Please, call me Peter. Don’t really fancy those formalities.”

Mrs. Darling looked between her husband and Mr. Pan. “An honour to meet you, sir, but shouldn’t you be inside? The show’s due to start soon!”

“Oh, it’s alright, I’ll make it. Besides, how else would I escort you folks to the VIP section?”

“VIP section?” Mrs. Darling looked to her husband for answers. They’d barely saved enough to be able to afford regular seats.

“Of course, only the best view for such enthusiastic fans. I ran into your husband at the ticket booth. They’d just run out of tickets, but I hate to let my audience down, and luckily

enough, there's quite a few VIPs who reserved seats but couldn't make it, so they're yours for the taking. Tell you what, I'll even give you all the special behind the scenes tour after the show. Meeting such excited kids always puts me in a great mood."

The children's eyes grew wide with wonder while Mr. and Mrs. Darling profusely thanked him as he led them into a back entrance toward the VIP seats.

He chuckled and shook his head, "Really, there's no need, it's been too long since I've shown someone the ropes, and it really is a delight each time. Now, as much as I'd love to continue our conversation, the show must begin." He smiled down at the kids, bustling with excitement in their front row seats. "I hope you enjoy the show." He left behind a curtain towards the restricted area of the tent.

Nothing that Wendy had heard about the Neverland Circus—the fantastical beasts, the trapezing Faeries, the knife-juggling, flame-swallowing Lost Boys, the grand fight between Peter Pan and Captain Hook—did justice for the real show now in front of her. The creatures and people were all fake, of course, save Mr. Pan. Renowned as an exceptional toymaker, he'd made headlines when he began creating incredibly realistic, life-size dolls to perform in a circus. He wished to create a fantastical show to bring childhood wonder to every audience, no matter their age. The crowd roared as Mr. Pan took a bow after his victory over Hook, the Darling children some of the loudest among them. He found them in the crowd and flashed one of his signature dashing smiles.

"Did I live up to your expectations?" He chuckled, meeting them once the audience left.

"Oh, you've greatly exceeded them, Mr. Pan, that was the most amazing thing I've ever seen!" Wendy replied, breathless from cheering.

"I'm very glad. Now, let's carry on with the second part of your night. A peek behind the curtains."

The children bound after Mr. Pan with their parents trailing behind as they all left for another tent with "No Entry" pasted at the entrance. Gasps filled the air as a menagerie of creatures and people came into view, now standing idle. Mr. Pan began explaining how they worked, the mechanical parts hidden under their lifelike exteriors, slowly strolling around the tent as the Darlings enthusiastically followed. Wendy came to a stop in front of Captain Hook, both fear and awe coursing through her as she peered closer. He looked much calmer compared to his sneers and shouts in the show; she could even swear he had tears in his eyes.

"He looks sad."

Mr. Pan came up behind her. "*It*, my dear. Do not fall victim to an inability to distinguish reality from fiction. And if *it* were, what would be the matter? Pirates are villains, no?"

Wendy furrowed her brows briefly but nodded and followed him to another section of the tent curtained off.

"This is where the magic happens."

"You mean where you make the dolls?" John gasped.

"Yes, would you like to come inside and see?"

The children eagerly nodded and rushed in as Mr. Pan held the curtain open. They were so enthralled they'd never noticed their parents far behind them, struggling against the pirates that'd come alive, forced silent by hands choking and gagging them. Peter met their eyes, rife with rage, horror, and tears, and flashed one of his charming smiles before retreating behind the curtain.

"How would you kids like to help my show next time? It'll be lots of fun!"

The children cheered as unbeknownst to them, the beasts came to life and blocked any exits.

"Excellent. You will enjoy it. After all, *to die will be an awfully big adventure.*"