



CHAPTER THREE

Now that her services were so seldom required, Penelope Pan was at loose ends. She had been replaced by Internet porn, *The Hunger Games*, X-Box, WMDs, Nooks, Afghanistan, 3-D TV, video games, Twitter, *Dancing with the Stars*, Ellen Degeneres, *The Bachelor*, the mortgage meltdown, Sarah Palin and the Tea Party. Due to these and other dismal distractions, imagination no longer qualified as a spellbinding outlet.

Never one to lose heart, Penelope continued to scan the world each day, scouting for that tiny welcoming sign that signaled the need for her services. True, she was searching for a certain childish mindset: the little boy living inside the disillusioned man. But no matter where she looked, maturity—like a plague of locust—had settled over the human race. Regardless of age, adulthood contaminated the planet. No light shown through, no pipe dreams offered her that funnel cloud of stardust she needed to rescue the grown man who kept the child inside alive.

That was Penelope Pan's target market. Other Pans were assigned to the opposite sex; Peter Pan, of course, took care of the children. But even the little ones were busily occupied outside the Theory of Creativity, their impressionable minds corrupted by Cocoa Puff ads, iPods, Facebook, *Pretty Little Liars*, DVD's, Waverly Place Wizards and 9-year-olds who carried guns to school.

Penelope was so hard-up, in fact, she sometimes mistook a searchlight for a help-wanted sign. The first time it happened it turned out to be a stupid premiere for one of Lindsay Lohan's stupid movies. Another time it was a casting call for *The Bachelorette*. Penelope blamed the deplorable state of affairs on herself. Word of mouth should have electrified the world by now. Her unique abilities should have spread like wildfire among those males able to sense where genius comes from. It was distressing to think what adventures these stuffy, close-minded robots were missing, the catalogues of brilliance they would never perceive. Did no man want to think for himself anymore?

Sitting on the purple grass amidst the wildflowers and blue willows of Netherland, Penelope was as close to gloom as she could afford to be without actually going there. If she failed to land a client soon, she would have to submit her resignation, return to Earth and start the aging process. She shivered at the thought. Despite the terrible dangers lurking in Netherland, nothing was as scary as growing old on Earth. Not the wrinkles, mind you. Penelope was much too up on Botox to worry about that. It was the spiraling downward of the spirit, that sinking feeling that all was lost. It was bad enough getting a whiff of these catastrophes every time she visited Earth.

Not that Netherland was without cost. Along with the risk to her client's testicles (vulnerable to the wiles of the murderous Simon Hook), Penelope had to refrain from emotional involvement. True Love was not permitted her. Thus far, she had avoided that peril by clinging to the belief that giving was far better than receiving. No, True Love was out of the

question for Penelope Pan—if she intended to remain in Netherland, that is. True Love was for mortals who rarely ever bothered to wait long enough to find it. And even if they did find it they could not seem to hang on to it. Better to remain among the Lost Girls and thrive on her independence.

In light of the maturity blight affecting Earth, however, Penelope was forced to accentuate the positive and eliminate the negative—the only way to jump-start her creativity. Teaching clients how to restore their childish imagination, after all, was the most fundamental part of her lesson plan. What was good for the goose was good for the gander. Right? Whatever a gander was. Regardless, it was time to get to work. Pulling her left earlobe, Penelope called upon her closest fairy friend, Ralph. He was the one person who could dispense her cares with a handful of plum-blossom dust (PBD). PBD, which the fairy carried in a jeweled Tiffany bag no larger than a baby's fingernail, produced a rosy haze of euphoria that instantly improved the thinking process and helped burn carbs.

Fortunately, Ralph came hopping over the rise at once, swinging his goody bag and traveling a zigzag course. Only several inches high, he wore strappy sandals (copies of the Christian Louboutins worn by Sarah Jessica Parker in *Sex and the City*), Estee Lauder foundation and MAC lip-gloss. He also had the annoying fairy habit of causing mischief and talking in rhyme. Knowing these quirks covered a deep insecurity stemming from taunts he had endured as a gay fairy child, she tried to put up with him.

“I’d walk a million miles for one of your smiles, my Pennnnnellllloooppee!” Ralph sang, opening his Tiffany bag and blowing

PBD in the air. Since Penelope was extremely open-minded, he already knew what she was thinking.

“I don’t see a single ray of hope down there, Ralph,” Penelope sighed, opening her hand on the chardonnay-colored grass so he could climb into her palm.

“No one knows...but you and me...the priceless gift of crea-ti-vity,” he said, plopping down on her lifeline.

It came to her in a flash. “I’ve got it,” Penelope said, her face alight. “We’ll do everything vice versa.”

Doubting a backwards approach would work, the fairy hesitated to douse her enthusiasm just yet. Besides, even though Penelope was large enough to quash him like a bug under her heel—had threatened to often enough—he could not get enough of her happy side. Sure, she got on her high horse every so often. Then again, all the Lost Girls were damn peevish at times. Still, Ralph had never met anyone quite like Penelope Pan.

Oddly enough, “Pen” as he called her, did not resemble others in the Pan family. She had a quirky quality, freckles even. No other Pan had freckles. As far as Ralph knew, freckles had been banned in 1999 after Peter mistakenly left his behind in Cincinnati. Peter Pan was always losing things, his shadow, for example. It was damn exasperating. But here was Penelope Pan with freckles. Since many considered freckles flaws on her otherwise flawless complexion, it took courage to wear them. But freckles seemed to work in perfect harmony with her golden-red hair and plump, peach lips.

To Ralph, Penelope’s freckles were little, round beauty marks that distinguished her from all the other Lost Girls. Admittedly smitten, the fairy

admired her figure as much as her freckles. The best part was when she allowed him to climb atop the highrise of her breast and slide down upon the pert nipple that protruded from her gauzy gown. It was quite a pleasurable experience, swaying on that erect tit. True, Ralph was a gay fairy, but that had never prevented him from valuing a great female bod. Plus, he was mostly unisex where pleasure was concerned. Not that he ever forgot his sexual orientation. No, it was the straight guys who lost their minds over Pen, most hit by so thunderous a lust it threatened to push them over the edge of the world.

Penelope was a legend, all right. She had one technique that had cemented her reputation in Netherland and all the other Lands, all except Neverland, where it got an NC-17 rating and was not considered appropriate for children. The technique, referred to as The Big One, required advance preparation and was reserved for very special Earth clients. Since it involved Ralph's Fairy Band and considerable kilos of plum-blossom dust, he was always there to watch and marvel.

As in all things, however, there was a down side to Penelope's extraordinary abilities. Black-hearted outlaws, especially the infamous Simon Hook, desired her for themselves. Hook had gone so far as to offer a sizeable reward for Penelope's arrest and capture. It sometimes took all the magic in Ralph's Tiffany purse to keep her out of harm's way. But keeping Penelope from loose ends was a whole other story. If no grown boys from Earth required her specialized abilities, what would become of her?

"Ralph!" Penelope snapped, bringing him back to reality. "Is your mind wandering again?"

“So tell me your scheme, you silly bean,” the fairy said, licking his glossed lips in anticipation.

“I’ll bring the boy to me,” she announced.

“Nay, nay, that won’t play,” Ralph said, sliding down Penelope’s thumb and onto the grass.

She heaved an exasperated sigh, a blizzard to the fairy. “You are SO frustrating, Ralph, damn it! I no more than get a brilliant idea than you put it down. And stop rhyming. It drives me nuts.”

“Rules are tools broken only by fools.”

Penelope turned away in a huff. “It’s beyond me why I call on you. You’re totally useless.” The fairy blasted more PBD Penelope’s way, and the sparkle returned to her sapphire eyes. “You know what they say, Ralphy. If Mohammed won’t go to the mountain...”

“The mountain won’t prance in this circumstance.” His tiny brow furrowed. “Operate against free will and you’ll not pay the bill.”

“If I think hard enough, I promise you I will have no trouble latching onto the right grown boy. I just know in my heart that some poor, henpecked guy is down there, crushed by feelings of rejection and inadequacy, just waiting for a resurrection.”

“Erection, you mean,” Ralph said, feeling the creative effects of the plum-blossom dust. “For the fairy-dust funnel has a quirk. Lacking bliss it won’t work.”

“You mean the funnel turns on only with a hard on?” Penelope said, horrified to find she was falling into rhyming herself. “If we work in reverse, I mean.”

“That’s right, sprite.”

“Oh, stop,” Penelope said, closing her eyes in a snit. “I’ll just have to put my mind to finding him.” And she fell almost at once into a trance. Ralph could tell she was in REM sleep, because her lashes always quivered on her cheeks in a certain way. He could even see inside her mind as it zoomed to Earth, busily canvassing cities and countries in a split second, descending into her favorite hunting ground, Southern California, investigating places like Monrovia, Torrance, Brentwood, Calabasas, Glendale, Irvine...

Hey! Wait! Glendale! Penelope and Ralph both skidded to a mental halt. There on the second floor of that duplex, where the one-eyed dog was looking out the window. Across the room, a guy was pumping his dick like a maniac—an empty Best Foods mayonnaise jar in one hand, his prick in the other. Only one problem. He was so perilously close to climaxing it was almost too late to initiate the fairy-dust funnel. Failing to suck up the mindless masturbator at precisely the right moment would cause him to stop what he was doing and plummet back into his miserable reality.

Such was Penelope’s power of concentration, however, Ralph was able to launch the fairy-dust funnel into Glendale and latch onto the guy mid-orgasm and—quite by accident—a very surprised one-eyed dog. In his haste to protect his master, Mozart had grabbed hold of the scratchy blanket in order to prevent Zack from being swallowed into the glittery tornado that had blown into the room. Thus it happened that two landed in Netherland that sunny afternoon—one Zachary Lancelot Amadeus Bartholomew and his one-eyed Golden Retriever, Mozart.

Since acceleration in a funnel-cloud is furiously fast, Zack hardly felt a thing. Intensely focused on possibly the best orgasm he had ever experienced in all his 49 years, he was still in a transported state when he opened his eyes. Hello! Something was terribly wrong. The sun shone overhead, a red sun in a pink sky. Blue willow trees rustled nearby, and the grass beneath him was purple. That said, the scratchy blanket Cassandra had hurled with her expletives through his office door about thirty minutes ago still covered his naked body.

Only, his office was exactly where?

Zack remained perfectly still, one hand firmly gripping the mayonnaise jar and the other holding the slippery, flaccid thing that had been huge only moments ago. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw Mozart frozen in place, a corner of the blanket still clenched in his teeth. Letting go of the blanket, the Golden Retriever spun into action, racing back and forth, howling at the sun, growling at the grass and baring his teeth at something on the ground—a very small thing. No, it was a very small man. Zack stared in disbelief. A very, *very* small man, only inches high, wearing sandals and carrying a tiny purse. Out of him came a pipsqueak voice. “Please doggie, please! Greet me, don’t eat me!”

“Oh, you beautiful, golden dog,” a beautiful voice said.

She came into Zack’s range of vision—This Vision.

“Hello,” The Vision said, her soft voice spilling from plump, peach lips that bloomed on a face of such adorableness the mere sight of it brought Zack to an immediate erection. Horrified, he dropped the mayonnaise jar, let

go of his dick and clutched the blanket around his out-of-shape, crooked body.

“Please,” The Vision said, her exquisite face clouded over. “Don’t be afraid.”

Wondering if he was having one of those dreams where you tried to speak and no words came out, Zack surprised himself by hearing himself say, “Sure!” Laid out on the purple grass like a corpse, he lifted his head and asked, “Where the fuck am I?” Penelope smiled. She sat down beside him and slipped her cool, pale hand under the blanket to offer reassurance. Another tent pole. Bolting to a sitting position, Zack clutched the blanket to him like a shield. “I’d prefer you didn’t do that,” he said, praying that masturbation had not—as his mother once warned—caused him to descend into madness.

“You are in Netherland,” Penelope said. “And you can blame me. I willed you here.”

“Netherland,” Zack said, noting again the gloriously pink sky, flowers so bright they hurt your eyes. But what really drew a second take was the rabbit riding a bicycle on a shiny, silver tightrope tied between two blue trees. Zack tried to shake the hallucinations from his head. “Cassandra was right,” he muttered. “I need Prozac.”

“The last thing you need is more medication,” Penelope said, laughing as she moved nearer. “Tell me your name.”

Backing from her as if she had just risen from a crypt, Zack said, “I know this is a hallucination. Maybe it’s stress or a really, really weird

nightmare, but I'll wake up any second and this will all be gone. Not you, Mozart. You stay! With me, I mean."

"Mozart," Penelope cooed, wrapping her arms around the dog, who wept tears of bliss at her touch. "What a splendid name." She turned her exquisite blue eyes back to Zack. "My name's Penelope Pan. As in Peter Pan."

"Sure. And I'm the King of Siam."

"We can play that game if you want," she said with gleeful enthusiasm. "It's terribly good for the imagination. You may be as domineering as you want. I'll even shave your head. Maybe we could write a mystery around it. I'm very good at dialogue."

"No shit," Zack said, patting the ground as if to test it for false advertising. But everything seemed so real.

"Would you like a robe?" Her perfectly plucked eyebrows lifted questioningly.

"I'd like to know what I'm doing here." A touch of anxiety showed in his voice.

Penelope's laughter spilled over him like a rhapsody of starlight. "We have ages to reveal all the wonders of Netherland." She put her finger to her lips. "Some of it has to be kept secret, though. Or it wouldn't be any fun."

"Pack, pack! Send him back!" the little voice said from somewhere in the neighborhood of Zack's feet. It set off another round of growls from Mozart.

"The fairy is still afraid of your dog," Penelope said.

“The fairy,” Zack said as though being asked to vote Republican.
“That is a fairy?”

“Yes. His name is Ralph. He doesn’t really want you to go. But if you don’t choose to wear a robe or clothes, you needn’t. I could even remove mine,” she said, beginning to lift off her gauzy pink camisole.

“NO!” Zack said, catching her hand just in time. “I don’t get off on nudism.” He thought a minute. “I’d have to get in shape first.”

“Over in the East, it’s different,” she warned. “If you are well served in certain areas, you best hide it under clothing. The pirates like to collect testicles.”

“Well, by all means, let’s get dressed and not venture to the East.”
Zack was certain of it now; he had lost his faculties.

“You still haven’t told me your name.”

“Zack. Zachary Lancelot... Zack Bartholomew.”

“Ralph can dredge something Ralph Laurenish up for you, Zack,” Penelope said, waving the small, surly fairy off to some mysterious place with a flick of her hand. “And don’t buy into Ralph’s lip gloss and blusher thing, Zack. You wait for me to do that for you.”

Mesmerized by her voice, those peach lips, those adorable freckles, Zack was beginning to willingly suspend his disbelief. So what if he had lost his marbles? So he was hallucinating? I mean, hello! Had he not gone to bed praying for the Goddess of Inspiration to pay him a visit? If this glorious creature had somehow evolved out of his imagination, well, wasn’t that a strong indication things were getting fertile again? Was he going to sit

around and complain because Penelope Pan wanted to apply a little gloss to his lips?

Threatened with another tent pole, Zack could risk no further erotic thoughts. “I think I have a right to know where I am and how I got here,” he said, assuming a more commanding position. Considering he was totally nude, his fingers still sticky with cum, he had precious little command at his disposal. “And don’t give me any ‘Second to the right and straight on till morning’ crapola.”

“Okay,” Penelope said, impressed with his verbatim quote from Barrie’s retelling of her brother’s story. “Let’s just say that by the time you leave here you’ll understand everything.”

But in the midst of the sentence, Penelope experienced a dark foreboding. Something ominous lay in store, something terrifying and sinister. Not one to dwell on disaster, she gazed out across the fields of wildflowers, the curative power of beauty always helpful in times of stress. Happily, Ralph and his fairy friends were already carting back a suitable outfit for Zack: Calvin Klein slacks, Ralph Lauren shirt, cowboy boots, silver-buckled belt and a red thong—the one item of clothing Penelope suspected Zack would resist. In a way he would be right to resist. The thong was best for taking off. Penelope guessed Zack would not object when—sometime after sundown—her fingers slipped beneath the red elastic band and ventured into those dark, damp, thrilling places only she knew how to reach.

Still, she knew the premonition was a warning. She had violated Netherland rules by operating the fairy-dust funnel backwards. There would

be a price to pay for bringing Zack to her instead of traveling to Glendale to seek his permission first. Danger awaited. Penelope wondered if she—much less Zack—would be equal to it.

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