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Opening extract from

Emily Windsnap's Four Swishy Tails

Written by

Liz Kessler

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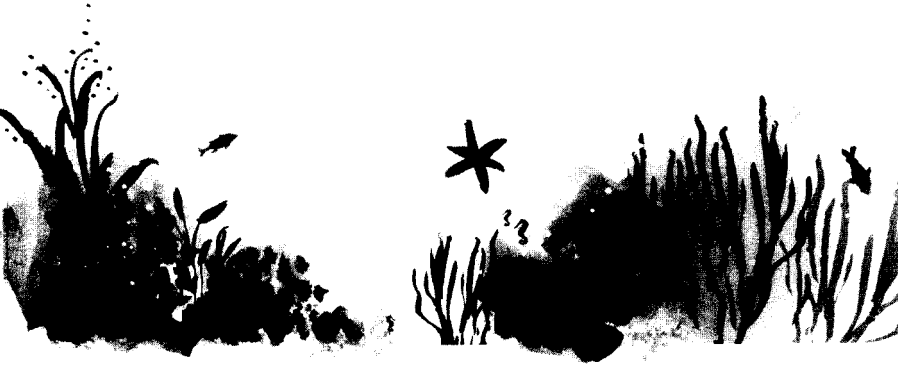
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All through the sunny blue-sweet hours
I swim and glide in waters green:
Never by day the mournful shores
By me are seen.

But when the gloom is on the wave
A shell unto the shore I bring;
And then upon the rocks I sit
And plaintive sing.

From The Moon Child,
by Fiona Macleod



Prologue



It wasn't a night for going out. Not unless you had to.

Sharp tunnels of wind whistled and shrieked around every corner. Trees bowed and shook and broke. Rain splattered viciously down at the pavements.

Out at sea, it was even worse. On the water, the storm had turned swells into walls the size of tower blocks. Waves foamed hungrily, like giant rabid dogs.

Anyone who knew about the sea knew this

meant one thing: Neptune was angry.

And anyone wild or crazy or brave enough to be out on such a night might have seen two figures in the distance, way out at sea, way beyond safe. A man leaned out from his fishing boat, calling to a woman in the water below him. 'Take it. Take it. Keep it close.'

'What is it?' the woman called back, shouting to be heard over the thunderous waves.

The man shook his head. 'I can't hear you!' Leaning further out, he added, 'When it's safe again, find me.'

'How?' she called, panic hitting her as hard as the waves that were now dragging them further and further apart.

He pointed to the parcel he had just given her. 'The shell!' she thought she heard him say, and then he added something that sounded like, 'There's magic in it.'

The woman thought about what she was leaving and the pain of it slapped against her harder than the next wave. 'What about –'

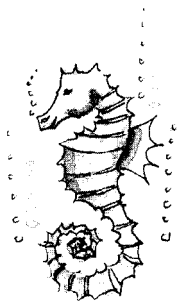
The wave washed the rest of her question away – but he knew what she was asking.

'I'll look after everything,' he called. 'Everything. Don't worry. It will be OK. Go now. Go, before it's too late.'

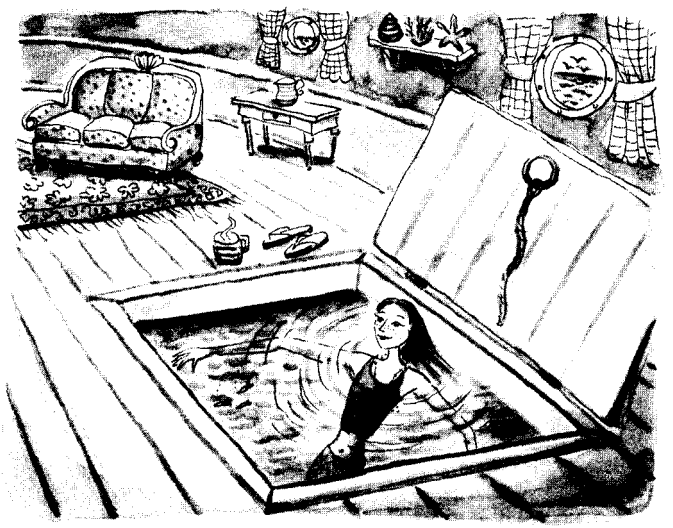
A moment later, the onlooker would have seen them part, each disappearing behind the hills and

mountains of the raging sea. Then they would have wondered if they'd imagined the whole thing, because surely no one would go out on a night like this.

Not unless they had to.



Chapter One



I know you're going to think I'm crazy when I say this, but something about my life wasn't right.

Why does that make me crazy?

Because for the first time in my life I was living with my mum and dad, together, in our beautiful home at Allpoints Island, with my best friend Shona living just round the corner and my new friend Aaron and his mum living nearby. There was *nothing* wrong with our lives.

Really. Absolutely nothing. No dad to be rescued

from prison; no sea monsters trying to squeeze the life out of me; no storms hurling our home halfway across the planet – all of which *had* happened to me in the last year.

Now all I had was day after day filled with sun, sand, friends, laughter. My life was perfect.

So why had I woken up restless and rattled every morning for the last week? I just didn't get it.

I sat up in bed and stretched, trying to remember what I'd been dreaming about. Fragments from a jumbled mass of weird dreams chased each other round in my head but I couldn't piece them together. All I could remember was the feeling they'd left behind. Not exactly unhappy – but definitely unsettled and, well, not right.

Like I said – crazy. How could anything about my life not be right?

There was something, though, and I couldn't ignore it. What's more, I had the feeling Mum felt the same way. Once or twice, while she was making dinner or reading a book, I'd seen her eyes go all distant and grey, as though she were looking for something far away, something she was missing.

I think deep down inside, I knew what was eating at us both; I knew what we were missing, even before the conversation with Archie that changed everything.

★

'Knock knock, only me!' A familiar voice trilled through the doorway, followed by a familiar thump as Mum's best friend, Millie, landed on the deck.

Fortuna, the boat we lived on, was moored out in the bay, half sunk in the sand so that the lower level was under water. With Dad being a merman, and me being a semi-mer, this meant we could both swim around on the lower level. Mum's bedroom was upstairs, but all the trapdoors in between made it easy for us to live here together. And the long jetty leading out from the beach to the boat was handy for getting on the boat without having to swim – which made it very easy for Millie to visit us without getting more than her feet wet.

She stuck her head round the door. 'Anyone home?'

I dragged myself out of bed and over to the door. Rubbing my eyes, I gestured for her to come in. Not that she needed an invitation. She'd already clambered in through the door and was busily wringing out the bottom of her dress over the side.

'Mum up?' she asked.

I rubbed my eyes and yawned. 'Not yet, I don't think. Why?'

'Someone's coming home!' she said excitedly. 'I just heard it on the seaweed vine.'

'The seaweed vine?'

'Just trying to keep up with the mer-speak,' Millie said, frowning. 'I meant I heard it on the grapevine. Archie's back today!'

That was when I noticed her face. Well, obviously I'd already noticed her face. I was looking straight at it. But I noticed what was on it. Bright blue eyeshadow arching high over each eye, and a thick red line of lipstick smeared across her mouth – and a few teeth. I pointed this out and she peered into the mirror by the door.

'It'sh been nearly tcho weeksh,' she said, wiping lipstick off her teeth with the edge of her sleeve. 'I've misshed him sho much!'

Archie is Millie's boyfriend. He's a merman and he'd been away on an assignment for Neptune.

'Is that Millie?' Mum's voice warbled out from her room. 'Come on in Mill, and stick the kettle on while you're passing.'

I left them to it.

Half an hour later, Mum was dressed and sitting upstairs with Millie in the saloon – that's what you call the living room on a boat. I wanted to go out and play with Shona and Aaron, but Mum said we should all wait with Millie; she was far too excitable to be left on her own.

I waited downstairs with Dad. We had a gymnastics day coming up soon at school and he was helping me with a tricky triple back spin that I had to do as part of the display. I could do two spins

perfectly but couldn't manage the third without swallowing a gallon of water.

I was just recovering from my fourth attempt when there was a sharp rap at the door.

'Archie!' I exclaimed.

'I doubt it, little 'un. When did Archie ever knock?'

I laughed. Archie was much more likely to turn up at one of the portholes. Mermen don't usually walk up to the front door.

We both poked our heads up through the trapdoor to see who it was. Mum was answering the door. 'Charles,' she said crisply. 'How nice to see you.'

Mr Beeston. Not exactly our best friend. Well, someone who's spent your entire life lying to you about who you really are, drugging you so you won't remember the truth and spying on you so he can report back to Neptune on your activities doesn't tend to fill your heart with love and warmth, in my experience.

However, after our latest batch of disasters, Neptune had made us all promise to put the past behind us and start afresh. So we'd been trying our best to be friendly and polite ever since.

Mum held the door open for him. 'Why don't you join us?' she said. 'We're just having a cup of tea.'

'Well I, I mean, I don't want to, you know,

I wouldn't like to be in your way,' he stammered, but came in anyway and sat down on the little sofa in the middle of the saloon.

'Hello, Emily,' he said, nodding at me and flattening his hair down.

'Hi,' I said and turned to swim back down, but Dad gave me a nudge.

'Go on up, now; you need to be polite, remember,' he said under his breath.

With a sigh, I pulled myself up through the trapdoor. As I did, I felt the familiar tingling feeling in my tail. Sitting on the side, I watched it flap and wave in the water. The tingling grew stronger, the purply green shimmer faded, my tail stiffened – and then it melted away and my legs emerged. I rubbed the tingle away. It always gave me pins and needles changing back from being a mermaid and my legs were wobbly for a moment, so I didn't stand up straight away.

'I believe Archieval is due back today,' Mr Beeston was saying to Mum as I dangled my legs over the trapdoor. He'd obviously been listening to the grapevine, too. That didn't surprise me. He always seemed to find out what was going on. Probably had spies working for him all over the place.

I knew we were meant to be friends now, but I still didn't trust him and I didn't see how Mum and Dad could be so happy to forgive and forget.

'So I've heard,' Mum said. Millie had got up to check herself out in the mirror again. She pulled at her hair and straightened her dress and was getting her lipstick out of her bag again when there was a noise downstairs.

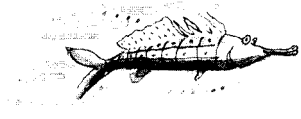
'That's him!' Millie squeaked. 'He's back!'

We all raced over to the trapdoor and looked down. Sure enough, two seconds later Archie appeared in the large porthole that we use as the downstairs door. He looked up. Grinning broadly, he flicked his dark hair off his face and swam across to the trapdoor. 'Hello all,' he said, looking straight at Millie.

Mum laughed. 'Right, come on, let's get a cup of tea and leave the lovebirds to it,' she said.

Mr Beeston gave Archie a quick nod. 'Good to see you back, Archieval,' he said before following Mum into the kitchen.

'Mine's an Earl Grey,' Millie called over her shoulder, without taking her eyes off Archie for a second.



'So let me get this straight,' Dad said as we gathered outside. Archie and Dad were in the water next to the boat, the rest of us sitting on the front deck. 'You've been in *Brightport* for the last two weeks?'

Brightport was my home. Well, I should say my

old home. It's where I'd spent all my life up until we moved to Allpoints Island – the only place in the world where humans could officially live alongside merpeople. In other words, the only place in the world where my mum and dad could live together. It's the swishiest place ever, and you couldn't want to live anywhere more perfect – but when my dad said the word 'Brightport' I suddenly got a dull ache in my stomach.

'That's right,' Archie replied. 'I didn't realise that was where the assignment was till we were almost there.'

Mr Beeston nodded seriously. 'Well, you know how important it is to Neptune to keep his assignments top secret. That's how it's always been in *my* experience of working alongside the king,' he said importantly.

Archie ignored him and carried on. 'Cranes and diggers had been spotted at the edge of the town, very close to our merfolk area just off the coast. Shiprock folk were getting scared and Neptune sent us to find out what was going on.'

There it was again, the pain in my stomach, only it was even sharper this time. Shiprock was the merfolk town where Shona used to live. Where I'd first gone to mermaid school. Just the mention of the place was enough to give me a funny twinge; the fact that something might be going wrong there made it twice as bad.

'So what did you find?' Dad asked.

'Most of the activity is on land so we were fairly limited. But we managed to discover that it's Brightport Council who are behind it.'

'What are they doing?' asked Mum.

Archie looked at her. 'Well, that depends who you ask. According to the enormous billboards that you can see from about a mile out at sea, they're "developing unused wasteland". But if you ask any of the merfolk at Shiprock, they're about to bulldoze the whole town to smithereens.'

'What d'you mean?' I asked. 'They can't destroy Shiprock, can they?'

'Depends how far they develop, and how many more cranes and diggers they bring out there. They're dangerously close as it is and their work is causing problems in the sea nearby. There've been daily landslides on the outskirts of Shiprock. Two families have already lost their homes. The whole of Shiprock could collapse if those builders get greedy and try to "develop" further into more of our town.'

'But that's terrible!' I said. I thought of the merpeople I'd seen and met in Shiprock, the school, all the kids, the parents, the old folk.

'It certainly is,' Archie agreed. 'The townsfolk are preparing for disaster as far as they can. Leaders are discussing plans for a major evacuation if needed, but they don't want to cause unnecessary panic. No

one knows exactly what Brightport Council have in mind, how far they plan to develop, so it's hard for them to make a plan.'

'Can't Neptune do something?' Mum asked.

'Neptune's put the area on high alert,' Archie replied. 'That means the town will have a unit there at all times, to watch what's going on. Beyond that, there's not much he can do.'

'Not much he can do?' I spluttered. 'We *are* talking about the same Neptune? He's more powerful than anyone!'

'Anyone in the *ocean*,' Archie corrected me. 'On land, he has no power to stop anyone doing anything. All he can do is monitor the situation and decide what kind of response to make, and when to make it.'

'How come you've come back here, then?' Mr Beeston butted in. 'Aren't you deserting your post? If Neptune has decreed that you are needed there at all times –'

'Neptune has decreed that *someone* is needed there at all times,' Archie went on. 'But we need a unit that is capable of getting into more of the area than we can access on our own. I have a few contacts on land, but no one who can really find out what's going on. No one with any influence.'

'So you're not going back?' Millie asked, a slight quiver in her voice.

Archie grinned at her. 'Not yet, I'm not. For one

thing, Neptune prefers me to be at Allpoints Island and keep an eye on things here. And for another – well, we need someone different from me. Someone who can gain access to areas that I can't.' He turned to Mr Beeston. 'Someone like you.'

'Someone like me?' Mr Beeston asked. His face turned crimson as he brushed some invisible dust off his collar. 'Well, of course, with an operation of such importance, Neptune is bound to ask for the most highly skilled, professional team on board, and I have to say, though not greatly surprised, I am flattered and –'

'What I mean is, we need a semi-mer,' Archie said, interrupting Mr Beeston in the middle of what was starting to sound like an acceptance speech for a grand award.

Mr Beeston is like me. Half mer, half person. I didn't know it until a few months ago – but then I didn't know it about myself, either, until I went swimming with school for the first time.

'We need someone who has access to the human world as well as the mer world,' Archie went on.

Mr Beeston sniffed and examined his collar again. 'So it's not the years of loyalty, highly skilled work and dedicated training that you're after? It's the fact that I've got legs,' he said.

'And a tail,' I put in. He gave me a look of scorn.

Archie reached into the bag slung by his side and pulled something out. 'Look, it's not just that,' he

said. 'You're wanted there.' He passed a bundle of papers on to the deck.

Mr Beeston picked it up. 'What's this?'

'One of my fisherman contacts smuggled it out to me,' Archie said. 'Read it.'

Mr Beeston unfolded the papers. 'It's just a list of names,' he said.

'Read the sentence at the top.'

Mr Beeston cleared his throat. 'We, the undersigned, believe important jobs should be operated by people, not computers. Don't let hi-tech development get out of hand. Reinstate the lighthouse keeper! Bring back Mr Beeston!'

Mr Beeston flicked through the pages of names. 'Well, I –' he began. 'I mean, I –' He looked up at Archie. 'This isn't a joke?'

Archie shook his head.

'The people of the town want me back?'

Archie nodded.

'And Neptune needs me?'

'He does.'

Mr Beeston pulled himself up straighter and higher. 'Well, then,' he said. 'I cannot let them down. I must return to Brightport.'

Which was the exact moment I realised why I'd been having bad dreams every night and waking up sad every morning – and why my insides had ached at the mention of Brightport.

I was homesick. It was as simple as that.

Mum turned to Dad. 'Jake,' she said. 'I – I –'

Dad swam over to the side and reached up to take her hand. I looked at Mum's face and I recognised the look in her eyes. It was saying the same thing as mine. It had been saying the same thing all along. These last few weeks when I'd caught her staring into the distance – I suddenly realised what it was she was searching for, what she was missing.

'She wants to go home,' I said.

Dad glanced at me. 'We are home, little 'un,' he said with a quick laugh. Then he turned to Mum. 'Aren't we?'

Before she could answer, Archie broke in. 'There's something else,' he said. 'I didn't know how to ask, but maybe this is a good time.'

Dad turned to him. 'What is it?'

'Neptune wants a team. If there's going to be trouble, he needs more than just one of us there. Beeston is a good choice for keeping Shiprock under control, and his contacts make him ideal for getting information on the Brightport side of things, especially using the lighthouse keeper cover again.'

Mr Beeston shuffled and flattened his hair down. Before he could launch into another Oscars acceptance speech, Archie added, 'I put your name forward as his assistant.'

'Me?' Dad asked. 'Neptune would put *me* in a

position of responsibility, after – well, after where I've been?'

Dad's not a criminal or anything, but he was sent to prison for marrying my mum. Intermarriage between merpeople and humans used to be highly illegal. But not any more. In fact, Neptune had now decided he wanted to bridge the gap between humans and merpeople – and he'd decided we were the ones to help him.

He'd told us we had to bring the two worlds together, get humans and merpeople to live in peace. And that was another thing: how could we change the world so that humans and merpeople lived in peace together if we were living out here in the one bit of the world where they already did? Everything was pointing to the same conclusion: we *had* to go back to Brightport.

Archie was still talking to Dad. 'Neptune doesn't hold on to the past,' he was saying. 'He knows you are loyal and dependable.'

'And married to a human,' Dad said.

'Exactly. That's the whole point. One of you to find out more about what's going on with the Brightport folk and one of you keeping an eye on things in Shiprock. Between you two and Beeston, we might just be able to avert a major disaster for the entire town.'

'You're not asking me to spy on my old friends, are you?' Mum asked.

'Not at all! Beeston and Jake will do most of the work. Just keep your eyes and ears open, in case you hear anything that the others miss; anything that could be a problem for the mer community at Shiprock. If anyone else needs to be rehoused, we'd rather they know in advance, so they can get all their belongings and move of their own accord, rather than wake up one morning to a bulldozer in their front cave.'

'Do you think that could really happen?' Mum asked.

'Absolutely. And I'll tell you something else: if another house is destroyed, folk there will *really* start to panic. Neptune doesn't like being in a position like this, where he has no control over what's going on. He's not used to it. If these plans cause more problems, he might decide to exhibit his power by ordering a full-scale evacuation – and most folk are *desperate* to avoid that.'

Dad looked up at Mum. 'What do you think?'

Mum chewed slowly on a thumb nail. 'I think we've been told to find ways to bring the human and the mer worlds together,' she said. 'If the human world is doing something that could threaten merpeople, then it's our duty to stop that from happening.'

Dad reached up and took her hand. 'I agree,' he said. 'This could be our first chance to start putting into practice the instructions that Neptune gave us.'

'Exactly. That's what Neptune said, too.'

Dad looked at Archie. 'What do you mean? What did he say?'

'That it was time you got on with your task. He said to tell you this was an opportunity to prove to him that he picked the right family for the job. He said it would be your first test.'

Dad puffed his chest out and nodded firmly. 'That's decided it, then,' he said. 'We don't have a choice.'

I felt a bubble of excitement rise through my body, tickling my insides and snaking up through my throat. 'We're going back to Brightport?' I asked, holding my breath while I waited for their answer.

Mum and Dad looked at each other and nodded. Then Mum turned to me. 'Yes, darling,' she said, with the first smile I'd seen on her face in days. 'We're going home.'

