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Forgive my Fins

Written by

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chapter extract



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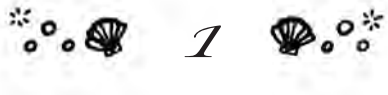
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For Sarah, because she took me with her



1

Water calms me. It's like chocolate or hot tea or dulce de leche ice cream. After a rotten day, I lock the bathroom door, fill Aunt Rachel's old-timey bath with steaming water and bath salts, and then sink into a world where my problems all melt away.

Some days it's not enough.

"Did you ask him?"

Securing the phone against my shoulder, I scoop up a handful of bubbles and blow the fluff out over my belly. I can choose to ignore the question, right? Especially since neither of us is going to like the answer.

"Lily…" Shannen prods.

When the bubbles hit the water and dissolve into a frothy film, I sigh.

The whole point of this bath was to make me forget my disastrous day – including the subject of Shannen's question – but that seems impossible. Even though I'm feeling slightly more mellow than when I slid in twenty

minutes ago, nothing can completely wash away that memory.

Too bad bath salts can't change the past.

"No," I admit with a frustrated growl. "I didn't ask him."

"I thought we agreed," she says, sounding exasperated. "You were going to ask him in maths when Kingsley made you swap papers."

"We did agree," I concede, "but—"

"But what, Lily?" she interrupts. "You're running out of time."

"I know that." Boy, do I know that. The sand in my egg timer is draining fast; graduation is just around the corner.

Leaning my head back over the bath's graceful curved edge, I let my hair hang to the floor below. A long mess of blonde that defies all attempts at control. I might as well have a sea sponge on my head, since no amount of conditioner or anti-frizz serum can tame the effects of Floridian humidity.

"But Kingsley didn't do the normal swap," I explain. "He made us swap down the row instead of across the aisle."

Shannen groans, and I can imagine the look of disgust on her face.

"I hate it when he goes to a professional development workshop," she says. "He always comes back and tries something new that never, ever works."

"I know," I agree, latching on to this divergent train of thought in the vain hope that it will make her – and me – forget our original topic. I'm not above avoidance tactics. I'll totally throw Kingsley under the bus to save myself from another lecture about seizing the day. "It was a total flop." I sit up a little straighter, gaining confidence in my distraction. "The Danfield twins switched places, and most of the class ended up marking their own papers. Kingsley congratulated us on our high grades."

Good grades are a rare thing for me. Shannen's top of the class and she tries to help me out, but I'm clearly not learning anything by osmosis or association or whatever. Can I help it if all these subjects are like a foreign language to me? My brain just wasn't wired for academic study. The only class I'm pretty sure of passing is art – and only because Mrs Ferraro likes me. Everything else might as well be advanced nuclear physics.

Besides, lately our unified focus has been on the upcoming Spring Fling dance and not next week's homework. With the dance only days away (as in

three), it seems a lot more urgent than an English essay on *Animal Farm*.

Tonight, though, I'd rather talk about homework. Or beauty products. Or swarms of killer jellyfish. Anything other than the thing she's asking about. I fumbled the plan… again. The last thing I need right now is Shannen telling me one more time that—

"You're a coward, Lily Sanderson."

—I'm a coward.

Son of a swordfish.

I give my tail fin a flick, sending the Key lime bath salts sloshing up over my shoulders. This is the same admonition I've heard every week for the past three years. You'd think I'd get tired of hearing it, pluck up my courage and get it over with. But the trouble is… she's right. I am a coward.

Especially where Brody Bennett is concerned.

We mermaids are a cowardly bunch. Keeping our existence a total secret makes cowardice pretty much a necessity. If we don't flee fast enough at the first sign of a passing ship, we might end up on the cover of next week's *Flash Paper*. We're more of an escape-now-ask-questions-later kind of species.

But with Brody it's like I take my flight response to a whole new level of spinelessness. I can make all the

plans in the world, be fully ready to follow through, and then the instant he's within sight, I totally clam up. I'm lucky if I'm able to breathe, let alone tell him how I feel. Hormones are cruel like that.

Still, the constant reminder of her cowardice can drive a girl to the edge. For a second – half a second, really – I consider blurting out the one thing I *know* will derail her lecture permanently.

But I've heard the stories.

I know what happens when a human finds out a mermaid is a mermaid. I love Shannen like a sister, but I can't take that risk. I can't put myself, my family and my entire kingdom in jeopardy for the sake of avoiding an unpleasant conversation. No matter how badly I want to confess, my duty comes before our friendship.

Shannen would understand.

So, instead of blurting out my dirty little secret – actually, not so dirty at the moment, since my fins are currently gleaming green and gold in the salty water – I resort to the pathetic truth.

"I tried, Shan." My head drops back against the porcelain bath with a well-deserved *thud*. "Really I did. This time I was super, super close. I took a deep breath, said his name, and…"

"And what?"

"Quince Fletcher threw a wad of paper at my forehead."

It had taken every last ounce of my self-control – and the dismissal bell – to keep from leaping out of my seat, apologising to Brody as I vaulted over him, and pummelling Quince into seaweed salad. Merfolk are a peaceful people, but that boy makes me wish I had free rein with Daddy's trident for a good five minutes. I've fantasised some pretty creative ways to shut Quince up.

"That idiot," Shannen says. "You'd think it was his self-appointed mission to make your life miserable."

"I know, right?" I rub the shower puff absently over my scales. "Why does he even bother? I mean, it's like his two hobbies are working on that disaster of a motorcycle and tormenting me."

Thing is, I don't even know why he is so devoted to winding me up on a near-constant basis. It's not like I've ever done anything to him, other than move into the house next door. At first we were almost friends… until he started treating me like the enemy.

Boys aren't nearly so confusing in the ocean.

"He needs to—" a *beep-beep* interrupts Shannen's response, "diversify."

"Hold on." I wiggle myself into a semi-sitting position. "There's another call."

Aunt Rachel got tired of my bathwater frying the circuits of the upstairs phone about three phones ago. The latest replacement doesn't even have Caller ID, and she swears that this is the last one. Ruin this one and there's no more phone in the bath. So I'm very careful not to lose my grip as I hold out the receiver and press the button.

"Hello?"

"You should check the curtains before you take a bath, princess," a deep, mocking voice says.

"Wha—" I half scream, half yelp as I sit bolt upright in the bath.

The nearest towel is folded neatly on the toilet… on the far side of the room. With a powerful kick I flop over the side, onto the cold tiled floor, and dive for the towel. I am just tossing it over my fins when I hear a roar of laughter coming from the receiver. Scowling, I snatch it off the floor.

"Priceless," he howls, still laughing. "You never fail to amuse, princess."

Aaarrgh! I slam the handset repeatedly on the floor, in what I hope are eardrum-damaging whacks.

"Why?!?" My flipper-fast heartbeat ebbs towards normal as I stare, first at the phone – which has suffered a few nicks from my display of rage – then at

the tightly drawn curtains covering the bathroom window. Holding the phone back up to my ear and ignoring the laughter still echoing through the earpiece, I ask, "Why do you enjoy torturing me so much?"

"Because," Quince manages between laughs, "you make it so easy."

Grabbing a handful of now-soaking towel, I throw it against the wall next to the door and watch it slowly slide down into the laundry basket. Aunt Rachel's cat, Prithi, meows in complaint from her position outside the door.

"You," I say as I pull myself back up onto the edge of the bath, "are a vile—" turning, I sink gingerly into the water, "repulsive—" even lukewarm, it feels heavenly, "slimy-headed vent worm."

I catch the phone against my ear before spreading my hands beneath the water to bring the temperature back up to a Zen-inducing near-steaming.

He chuckles once more before answering, "That's a new one."

"I've got dozens more where that came from," I assure him as I sink back against the end of the bath and close my eyes. "Care to hear some?"

The salty water envelops me, calming my electrified nerves. Slightly.

"Someday," he says, "I might take you up on that offer."

"Fraidy fish," I mutter, closing my eyes and imagining I'm back home, the warm currents of the Gulf Stream swirling around me as I float beneath my favourite spot of ocean – the shallow bank just east of Thalassinia where a forest of sea fans and staghorn coral gives me the camouflage I need so I can lie for hours, watching the colourful fishing boats pass above.

That spot is my bliss. I've never taken anyone there, not even Daddy. I'm saving it for someone special. I'm saving it for Brody.

When I feel homesick, I picture us there.

"Admit it, princess," Quince says in what I can only imagine he thinks of as a teasing voice, "you'd be bored without me."

"Without you," I reply, wishing there were more than fourteen feet and two panes of glass separating me from neighbour boy, "I'd have a date to the Spring Fling."

Sudden silence. The base of my neck prickles.

"A date?" he demands.

My eyes flash open.

I hadn't meant for that to slip out. The reheated

water relaxed me *too* much. I can't let my guard down for a second when I'm talking to Quince.

"You're not still panting after that Benson jerk, are you?"

"Bennett," I snap before I can catch myself. Then, "I don't know what you're talking about."

"I think you do—"

"In fact," I say decisively, "I don't know why I'm still talking to you."

"You're talking to me," he says before I can click back over to Shannen, "because I can help you hook your crush."

"Ha!" I say, brilliantly. Then I follow it up with some hysterical laughter. As if the bane of my existence would ever help me. As if he *could*. "Nice try, Quince."

"Fine." He *tsks*, as if I've made a poor choice. "When you're ready for help, you know where to find me."

Yeah, in the house next door, peeping on me in the bathroom.

"I wish I didn't," I say. "Hey! How did you know I was in the bath, anyway?" Silence from the pervy end of the line. "Hello?"

Damselfish! I wanted to be the one to hang up on him this time.

The phone beeps, letting me know that Shannen is

still waiting on the line. I should have known she wouldn't give up. We haven't finished with the whole asking-Brody-to-the-dance thing. She never misses an opportunity to let me know how I've screwed up and how I can improve myself next time.

I'd wonder why I still speak to her if she weren't my best human friend.

I click over.

"I'm back."

"Who was it?"

"Nobody," I answer, meaning it.

"Quince." It's not a question.

"Whatever," I say, slapping my fin absently against the end of the bath. "Just get on with chastising me so I can go to bed."

Shannen ignores my pouty comment. "What did he want?"

"What does he ever want? To bug the carp out of me."

I'm not about to tell her about his offer – or about his spying on me from his bathroom. After three years of living next door to the pervert, I've stopped begging my aunt to move. In a few short weeks I'll be heading back to Thalassinia to complete my education, learning how to rule at my father's side. I'll never have to see or

hear him again. He'll be nothing more than a distant, nightmarish memory.

"He must have wanted something in partic—"

Not in the mood to discuss Quince, I turn back to the subject I know will derail her. "I think I'll ask Brody before school tomorrow."

She switches tracks instantly. "You'd better," she warns. "Time is running out. The dance is on Friday."

"Yes, I—"

"That's three days away."

"I know that." I sit up, twisting round and slipping against the porcelain as I pull the plug out of the drain. "But since he just broke up with Courtney, I don't think he's exactly had time to troll for and reel in a replacement."

I can practically feel her heavy sigh.

"I'm too tired to argue with your fishy phraseologies," she says. "Have you decided what you're going as?"

The water swirls slowly down the drain, leaving a fine film of salty soap on my skin and scales as it sinks. "No," I answer as I cup some water up over my chest to rinse it off. "I told you, I'm not going in costume. It's stupid. I'm not a g—" I stop myself from saying

'guppy'. Even after three years it's hard to keep my sea slang in check. "I'm not a little kid."

"You have to," Shannen insists. "It's a costume dance. A Seaview tradition."

"I'll think of something," I say, just to pacify her.

The water gurgles as the last inch starts to disappear down the drain.

"It has to fit with the Under the Sea theme."

"No, it—"

"I've got it," Shannen shouts, excitement ringing in her voice. "I know exactly what you should be."

"Really?" I ask absently, grabbing the washcloth draped over the side of the bath and wiping the traces of soap film off my scales. "What?"

"You should go as—" she pauses dramatically, "a mermaid."

I drop the phone. Then quickly scramble to get it out before the remaining half inch of water fries its circuits. Aunt Rachel will never buy another one.

"No," I say as water drips off the phone and I hear the distinct sound of crackling electricity. "No, that wouldn't work."

"Think about it. We could *both* go as mermaids," she says. "We'll talk at lunch tomorrow."

I set the still-dripping phone on the base, its cords

stretched under the bathroom door to the jack in the hall, and sink back against the empty bath.

Forgetting Shannen and Quince and Brody – well, I can never entirely forget Brody – I focus on my transfiguration. Most of the time I shift between forms without much thought. But when I'm away from the sea, I use my powers less and less. Reheating my bathwater. Chilling my morning juice. Transfiguring for my bath a few times a week. Nothing like when I'm home. Sometimes it makes me feel closer to home to focus on feeling the transition.

Drawing on the magical powers of my people – powers granted by Poseidon's sea nymph Capheira, our ancient ancestor – I picture my iridescent scales dissolving completely away and pale pink skin appearing in its place. Why couldn't I be lucky enough to be born with a tan?

Still, it feels good to have my legs back. After spending the first fourteen years of my life with fins, it's amazing how comfortable I am in terraped form. Three years on land and I feel like I was born to it. I suppose that's because Mom was human.

I wonder what she would think of me, lying here in her sister's bath, dreaming about the boy I love. Would

she be proud? Disappointed? Glad I'm embracing my human half? I guess I'll never know.

As I wiggle my lime-green-tipped toes, I hear a hiss and a loud *crack*… just before the lights go out.

Prithi meows.

"Lily," Aunt Rachel shouts from down the hall. "Have you been using the phone in the bath again?"

Covering my face with my hands, I wonder if I never should have left the sea in the first place. High school may be great for humans, but it's no place for a mermaid.