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Fins are Forever

Written by

Tera Lynn Childs

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Fins are Forever
Tera Lynn Childs



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For Jenny, because she keeps the crazy at bay

1

At the moment I am sole heir to the throne of Thalassinia, one of the most prosperous underwater kingdoms in the world. I am a princess without equal in most of the seven seas, or any other body of water, for that matter. Raised to all the duties that my title requires and prepared to be my kingdom's future queen, I am respected, revered and really, really loved by (most of) the people.

A mermaid and a princess, all wrapped into one. Talk about every little human girl's dream.

But come my eighteenth birthday in eighteen days – not that I'm counting – I'll be just a girl. Well, still a mergirl, true, but an average mergirl just the same.

At midnight, after my birthday ball, I will sign the renunciation paperwork, inking Princess Waterlily out of existence. In her place will be plain old Lily Sanderson, living on land, dating the boy she loves, and trying to figure out this human thing once and for all. I'm also facing a whole new wave of pressures that go

along with the job – college, career, future, tests and applications and grade average and a million other little things that weren't even on my sonar when the plan was to return to Thalassinia after graduation next month.

It's a little overwhelming at times, which possibly explains why I'm doodling hearts and bubbles and L+Q=4EVA instead of copying Mr Kingsley's notes from the board.

"There should be a law against having maths this late in the day," Quince complains from the desk next to mine.

Startled, I hastily cover my daydreamy notes with my textbook and look up at Quince. But his attention is focused – as mine should be – on our teacher and the equation on the board. I sigh with relief. I shouldn't be embarrassed by my love doodles, because we are officially a couple now, so I have every right. Still, I don't want him to think I'm any more of a lovesick guppy than he already knows.

Casually as I can, I flip to a clean page and try – pretend – to focus on maths. My attention is still on Quince.

Head hanging down over my textbook, I slide another sideways glance at his handsome face. Mostly just because I can, but also because he's nice to look at. There's not much fault to find in his strong jaw, dark

blonde hair and Caribbean blue eyes. Eyes that remind me of home.

Before the accidental kiss and bond that brought us together, he sat one row over, on the other side of my recently former crush, Brody. When I came back to Seaview and we started dating officially and for certain, Quince made Brody switch so he could sit next to me. I never knew Brody was such a pushover, but I'm glad. This is the only class Quince and I have together, and I'd rather have him at my side.

"I know, right," Brody says from one row over. "Maybe we should start an anti-maths petition."

Quince laughs. He's been a lot nicer to Brody since I got over my ridiculous and unfounded crush and started dating *him* instead.

Tearing his attention away from the board, Quince turns to face me, catching me staring – okay, *ogling*. Even though, as his official girlfriend, I have free rein to stare – okay, *ogle* – I still can't stop the heat that blushes my cheeks to what I'm sure is an anemone shade of red.

"You're watching me, princess." His soft lips spread into an appreciative smile. "People might get the *wrong* idea."

"What, that I actually like you now?" I tease.

He shakes his head and leans towards me. "No, that you're trying to see past me to get an eyeful of Benson."

He tilts his head in Brody's direction. He knows it bugs me when he deliberately gets Brody's name wrong. But I'm learning not to rise to the bait. Instead, I fight back.

I shift my gaze to the board and fix an innocent look on my face.

"What makes you think that's the wrong idea?"

Quince leans even closer and says, "Because you came back for me."

"I—"

Thankfully I'm saved from coming up with a response by the bell signalling the end of sixth period. I'm getting better at trading barbs with him, but I'm not even close to his level yet.

Everyone, including Quince and me, hurriedly shoves their maths books into backpacks and messenger bags and bolts for the corridor before Kingsley can assign the homework he's forgotten.

"I wish you had study period," I say as we weave through the crowd. It would be nice if we had it together.

"Me, too," he says, placing a gentle hand on my lower back to guide me into an opening in the stream of

students. "Between my job and your extra-curriculars, I've barely seen you since you came back."

"I know." I weave closer to him to avoid an overstuffed backpack. "It will be better after graduation."

"Then I'll start working full-time," he argues.

"It'll still be better," I insist. "No more homework until college."

If I get in, that is. My grades have been sub-mediocre – partly because many of the subjects are completely foreign to the mer world, and partly because I never imagined going to college. I didn't need a degree to rule Thalassinia. Now that's all changed, and at my meeting with the careers adviser this week, I learned that the only way I'll get into college – *any* college – is to ace the SATs. I've enlisted my genius best human friend's help and enrolled in an intensive test-prep class, but I'm not counting on a decent score. Tests and I don't really get along.

"You'll get in," Quince assures me, proving once again that he can read my mind, even without a magical bond. "And if you don't," he adds, slinging an arm around my shoulders, "you can always take over for me at the timber yard."

"Ha ha," I reply, sending a sharp elbow into his ribs.

"Lighten up, princess." He tugs me closer, probably

so I can't swing my arm enough to get in another jab. "You'll do fine."

"What, you're psychic now?"

"Didn't you know?" he asks seriously. "Must be an after-effect of the bond."

I sigh. If only that were true. If only Daddy hadn't severed the bond fully and Quince still had some mer magic in his blood. If only.

I lean into his side, inhaling his scent of leather and mint toothpaste.

But I can't change the past. I just have to content myself with being with him here. Which isn't as rare as he seems to think. Ever since I returned to land, to high school, to Seaview, to him last week, Quince has been walking me to classes when he can and giving me rides to and from school on his charming death trap of a motorcycle. He's even stopped by a couple of times to share milk and cookies when he gets home from his part-time job at the timber yard. He's being a most devoted boyfriend – something I never would have guessed in the three years that he tortured and tormented me at every turn. Who knew he secretly loved me?

I'm a very lucky girl.

And the best part? He thinks he's a very lucky boy, too.

We've just made it into the corridor that leads to my classroom and the boys' locker room when the rumble starts.

At first it's just the sound, a deep, low roar that sounds like the earth itself is moaning. That startles nearly everyone in the corridor and they stop, looking around, uncertain at this strange, unidentifiable sound.

Then we feel it. The ground beneath me starts to shake, kind of like when a wave comes in and pulls the sand from beneath your feet – except that I'm standing on linoleum tile, not a beach.

"What the hell?" Quince shouts above the roar and the shouts of panicked students.

The classroom door closest to us slams shut.

"I don't know," I reply, grabbing hold of his hand and squeezing. "It almost feels like... an earthquake."

The metal locker doors grind against their frames, and the fluorescent tubes above flicker with the movement.

This is crazy. Florida doesn't have earthquakes like this. Especially not *south* Florida. Hurricanes? Yes. Tornadoes? Occasionally. Swarms of killer sharks offshore? Unfortunately. But it doesn't have earthquakes, and certainly not ones this powerful. The entire school is shaking.

"Come on," Quince yells, pulling me towards the gym. "We need to get in a doorway."

We're not the only ones with that idea. Groups of terrified-looking students huddle under the beige metal frames of the four sets of double doors leading to the boys' gym. There's just enough room for us to squeeze into the last doorway.

I don't know how Quince knows what to do – I guess he's just that kind of can-do guy – or why a doorway is the best place to be, but I'm relieved. Land-based earthquakes are way beyond my realm of experience. I've been in a few underwater quakes. They're not at all the same. Mostly it's a lot of noise and heavier-than-usual current flow. If the epicentre is close, sometimes the ground vibrates a little. Our belongings might get swirled around, but our buildings don't shake. Nothing like this.

None of our settlements are built on fault lines, so we don't have to worry about what would happen if the epicentre were directly beneath Thalassinia.

They might be feeling the effects of this quake, though. The kingdom isn't that far offshore. If the school is shaking around me, who knows how far out the tremors are radiating? I should send a messenger gull when I get home, just to check in.

"Maybe it's a bomb," a terrified freshman next to me whimpers.

"Or a terrorist," her friend says, gasping. "It could be an attack."

"It's not an attack," I say, trying to calm them down without rolling my eyes at the melodrama.

Quince leans round me and gives them a reassuring smile. "It's just an earthquake. It'll be over in a—"

Before he finishes, the roar quiets and the ground stills.

The corridor goes eerily quiet, everyone frozen in an aftershock of confusion. Even the lights above have stopped flickering. I'll bet Seaview High has never been this silent during school hours ever. Then, after half a second, the corridor explodes in noise and chatter as still-freaked students hurry on to their classrooms.

Quince says, "That was…"

"Weird," I finish.

Quince and I stand there, hand in hand, for several long moments, like we're waiting for something. For the other shoe to drop, maybe. The fire alarm or a tsunami or just another quake. It doesn't seem like this sort of thing could just… be over.

After a couple of minutes, it seems obvious that it was a one-time thing.

The PA system squeals to life, blasting from the speakers in the corridor ceiling. "All students, please proceed to your seventh-period classrooms immediately. Seventh-period teachers, please print out your attendance sheet and send it to the front office when all students have been accounted for." There's a squeal – they really should have Ferret, the news team sound guy, check out the mic – and a short pause, followed by, "Teachers with an open seventh period, report to the principal's office for further instruction. That is all."

"You okay?" Quince asks, his voice sounding a little odd.

"Yeah," I reply, reluctantly letting go of his hand. "We'd better go."

"I'll meet you right here after seventh." He presses a quick kiss to my lips before turning and heading into the gym.

I hurry to my study period classroom two doors down, wondering if everyone is feeling as unsettled as I am.

The staff spend the first half of the period continually reassuring the students that everything is fine, that Seaview is fine and that classes should continue as usual. Which is difficult, considering the semi-constant

interruptions by the blaring PA system. When Brody shows up in the doorway twenty minutes before the final bell, I've only managed to read one (really short) paragraph of *A Separate Peace*.

"Hey, Coach Parsnicky," Brody says to my study period supervisor. "I need to steal Lily away."

Parsnicky, coach of the freshman girls' basketball team, shrugs and waves vaguely at me and then at the door. He doesn't even look up from his playbook long enough to see the yellow pass in Brody's hand.

"News team?" I ask, slipping a heavily doodled sheet of notebook paper into the book to mark my spot and then shoving the book into my backpack. I like the book well enough, but I'm relieved I don't have to try to reread another word right now.

Brody nods, giving me that charming smile that used to make my heart flutter and my legs buckle. Now I just smile back. It's funny how much things can change in a matter of days.

"Principal Brown wants us to do a special report about earthquake safety for Monday's announcements," Brody says as we step into the corridor. "Everything's great, don't panic, obey all traffic laws."

"Basically everything they've been broadcasting for the last half hour," I reply. School security propaganda.

"Pretty much."

In my time as the news team cameraperson, we've done almost fifty special reports. Most of them are fluff pieces about school dances and sports stars. A very few are what Brody calls Seaviewgates, uncovering things like unfair marking scandals and faculty criminal records. (Madame Elliott was subsequently cleared of all charges, by the way.) And the rest of our reports are school-sanctioned announcements that the staff thinks will actually stop locker vandalism – aka spray paint – and car park rage.

They have virtually no effect whatsoever.

I don't mind the fluff pieces – I'm just the eye behind the camera anyway – but I'd love it if we could do some actually useful segments. Interviewing marine biologists about ocean warming. Or maybe an exposé about illegal offshore dumping, which happens more often than the general population knows. Or even some tips about water conservation. Something that might mean something to the world.

When we reach the studio, Ferret and our CGI specialist, Amy, are already prepping the equipment.

"I've got our cameraman," Brody announces.

"Camera*woman*," I correct, slinging my backpack onto the floor from the door and crossing to the video

camera. It's pointed at the green screen, where Amy can add whatever background the newscast needs.

"What's the plan?" I ask as I remove the dust-deflecting cover from the camera and power it up.

"Just give me a minute to tweak Principal Brown's script," Brody says, dropping into the chair behind the computer and opening the file. "We don't have much time to pull this together. Lily, can you set up the autocue?"

We all dig into our duties, and as I set up the autocue for Brody, I think about how lame this safety speech will be, even after Brody fixes it. We should really be reporting on the cause and effect of the quake. Why waste the students' time when we could, you know, *educate* them instead?

"Brody," I say, turning away from the autocue, "I have an idea."

"What's that, Lil?" he asks, not looking up from the screen.

"What if we trim Principal Brown's safety speech," I suggest, "and add on an expert interview?"

Brody actually looks up at me. "Who do you have in mind?"

"I don't know," I admit. "Maybe one of the science teachers? Maybe—"

"Miss Molina." Brody jumps to his feet. "She teaches earth science."

"And she runs the Environmental Club," I add.

"Perfect," we say at the same time. Two weeks ago I would have taken that as some kind of cosmic sign. Today I just think we're on the same page for once.

"Amy, pull up the interview backdrop." He heads for the door. "I'll go and get Miss Molina. Have everything ready when we get back. This is going to be a bell chaser."

Yeah, we're going to be cutting it fine.

He disappears into the corridor and the rest of us scramble to get everything into place. By the time he returns with Miss Molina in tow, we're ready to go.

"Hi, Miss Molina," I say, waving from behind the camera as Brody gets her situated for the interview.

"Hello, Lily," she replies with a smile.

I was in her class freshman year. She inspired me to sign up for the Environmental Club, but once I joined the news team and became swim-team manager, I didn't have time. Considering the reason for my choices – spending time with Brody – I kind of regret not sticking with the Environmental Club.

"Okay," Brody says, adjusting his body mic. "Ready."

Ferret does the countdown, I start recording and the segment begins. There's no time for clever angles and

splicing cuts, so I just leave the camera on a wide view and let it roll. I listen eagerly as Brody asks a few mundane questions about the sources of earthquakes and why scientists can't predict them.

I don't usually interrupt his interviews because he's pretty intense about the process, but I can't help asking, "What about the effects offshore?"

"What do you mean?" Miss Molina asks, turning to face me.

I glance at Brody, expecting a dirty look for stealing the focus, but he looks intrigued.

"Um, I mean," I stammer, "if we felt the quake so strongly on land, then surely it was felt in the ocean, too."

"Most likely," Miss Molina answers.

"Then what kind of effects will it have on ocean geology and sea life?" I feel a little self-conscious, especially since I already know the answers. The students of Seaview probably don't, though. And maybe they should. "Do earthquakes cause the same kind of destruction underwater as they do on land?"

"Not usually," she responds, speaking directly to the camera. "The vibrations, which cause so much damage up here, are absorbed by the water."

"How interesting," Brody says, wresting the interview

back into his control while sticking to the new direction. "Tell us more about underwater quakes."

I smile behind the camera, content to watch Brody go after the topic with his usual determination. For the next ten minutes, he quizzes Miss Molina about earthquakes and plate tectonics and undersea land shifts with the agility of a seasoned reporter. I throw in a couple more questions, when the interview slacks, but for the most part Brody is masterful.

With only a few minutes before the bell, he calls the shoot a wrap. I hand him the video disc, and he heads to the editing station with Ferret to pull together the final cut. I shut down the camera and start to pack up the autocue.

"Can I have a moment, Lily?" Miss Molina asks.

Her serious tone makes me a little nervous, but I say, "Sure."

I carefully coil the cable that connects the autocue to the computer.

"I was very impressed with your knowledge of underwater geology," she says. "You plan on going to college?"

"I do," I answer. "*If* I get in. My grades aren't great and I still have to take the SATs."

She reaches into her handbag and pulls out some papers. "Do you know what college you'd like to attend?"

"Whichever one will take me," I say. Slacker mer princesses can't be choosy.

"You should think about Seaview Community," she says, handing me the papers. "Their admission requirements are not as stringent as at other colleges, but their classes and professors are first-rate. I'm actually a graduate of the marine biology course."

"Really?"

"Don't tell anyone earth science is only my second love." She nods at the paper. "They offer a summer internship for incoming first years. Unpaid," she explains, "but terrific experience."

I skim over the papers. According to the bullet points, students accepted onto the course are set up with internships at the aquarium, the zoo or a local scientific firm. That's a huge opportunity for anyone who wants to go into marine biology. Which I just might. I need a career now, and that one seems like a perfect fit. The course has a special concentration in marine ecology and conservation. That would give me a chance to help Thalassinia, even if I'm not the queen.

The papers also say that students must demonstrate sufficient interest and aptitude for the field, as well as having both practical and educational experience.

Well, that takes me out of the running.

"I don't think I have enough experience," I insist. "I've only had one year of biology, and I haven't been in Environmental Club since freshman year."

"That's more than most of their applicants will have," she argues. "I can guarantee you a good chance at acceptance onto the course and a scholarship."

"How?"

"Because I can see you have a passion for the field," she says. Leaning back, she smiles. "And I have brunch with the course director every Sunday."

"That's—" I shake my head. "Wow."

"If you're seriously interested," she says, "I could set up an interview for you."

"That would be awesome, Miss Molina."

"How about next Saturday?" she suggests. "Denise is free in the mornings, and you could swing by her office on campus."

I do a quick mental calendar check. "Next Saturday would be perfect."

"Great," she says. "I'll set it up. Meanwhile, you go online and research the school and the course."

"Absolutely!"

I shake my head in awe as Miss Molina walks away. Talk about a perfect situation. Me studying marine ecology. Working to protect the oceans from up here on

land. I shove the papers into my backpack, promising myself I'll go online tonight and check out the course website.

The school bell rings, sending me scurrying to clean up. I finish with the autocue and then help Ferret put away the sound gear. We're just locking the sound cabinet door when Brody finishes his edit.

"Done!" he announces as he clicks the send button, shooting the digital video to Principal Brown's email account for approval so it can run during homeroom on Monday morning.

We give one another a round of high fives and then grab our bags. I flung mine further than the rest, so I'm the last one left in the classroom.

"I figured you'd be in here," a deep voice says.

Quince! I turn and find him leaning in the doorway, arms crossed over his chest and an amused smile on his face.

He lifts his brows. "I thought we were meeting outside the gym."

Damselfish.

He's teasing, but I still feel bad. I completely blanked.

"Sorry," I say, hurrying over and slipping my arms around his waist. "I lost track of time. Miss Molina was

telling me about the marine biology course at Seaview Community."

"Oh, yeah?"

"She's going to set up a meeting for me with the course director. She thinks I have a good chance of getting in and getting an internship and a scholarship."

"That's great." He slips a hand beneath my backpack strap, pulls it off my arm and slings it onto his shoulder as we leave the classroom.

I hope I haven't made him late for work.

Quince and I fall into a comfortable silence as we walk to his motorcycle and then on the ride to our street. All in all, it's pretty handy having a next-door boyfriend. Especially when he has transportation.

He pulls into the shared driveway between Aunt Rachel's house – my house, too, I guess – and his, purring his bike to a stop.

I climb off and remove my pink helmet.

"How late are you working?" I ask.

His arm darts out and round my waist, tugging me closer. "Until eight."

I make a little pouty face, but I'm not trying to guilt him or anything. I don't begrudge his job at the timber yard. Not only does it help out with his mom's expenses, it also helps out with those strong

muscles that are holding me against his side right now.

"You'll stop by after?"

He rises up and presses his lips against mine. "Absolutely."

I'm tempted to sink in to him and collect on the promise of more kisses, but I don't want to make him later than he already is. He missed a bunch of work the last few weeks because of the time we had to spend in Thalassinia to get our separation. He and his mom can't afford the lost pay for being late.

You might think I'd regret choosing to sever the magical bond that formed between us when Quince gave me my first kiss, four weeks ago. At the time, though, it was the only choice I could make. I wasn't sure of my feelings, I didn't trust them, and I wasn't about to ask him to make a lifetime commitment on a hunch. He would have been tied forever to me and Thalassinia, forced into whichever body form I was in for the rest of his life. That's a lot to ask for a land-loving guy with a struggling single mom who relies on his help and his paycheck.

And now that I'm sure of my feelings... well, I guess I'm still glad about the separation. If we'd stayed bonded, I'd probably be in Thalassinia right now, performing some kind of boring princess duty or tedious ceremony

or critical judgement. Part of me belongs on land. An even bigger part of me belongs with Quince. The rest of me is terrified of the kind of responsibility that comes with becoming crown princess or – worse – queen. Yep, I'm happy with my choice.

"Go then," I say, giving him another quick kiss. When he starts to wrap his other arm around me, I twist out of his grasp. "Later."

He breaks into a grin. "See if Aunt Rachel will make those Key lime bars again."

"Is food all you think about?" I tease, shoving against his shoulder.

"No," he replies, all serious. "Sometimes I think about football."

He twists the throttle and is backing down the driveway before I can smack him again.

"Careful, or I'll request the prune pistachio balls!"

Not one of Aunt Rachel's greatest cookie experiments.

He laughs, that deep, unrestrained laugh that makes me shiver all over. As he roars off down the street, I watch until he turns the corner and disappears from sight. Oh, sigh.

When Aunt Rachel gets home from the pottery studio at seven, I have all the ingredients for Key lime bars

spread out on the counter. I am in no way prepared to actually attempt this recipe by myself. Electronics are my friend, but cooking is not. The one time I tried to use the oven without supervision I nearly burned off my eyebrows. Lesson learned.

I've also finished my homework (except for maths, which I'm saving to do with Quince), so I quickly clear my books and notebooks into my backpack. Prithi meows in annoyance as I step away from the table, taking my toes out of licking range. Since the day I arrived, she hasn't been able to resist licking or nibbling or rubbing against me at every opportunity. I wonder if mergirls are irresistible to all cats, or just to Prithi.

"What's for dessert tonight?" Aunt Rachel asks as she drops a shopping bag and her always overflowing handbag – filled with magazines, art supply catalogues, shawls, aluminium water bottles and who knows what else – on the bench by the kitchen door.

She amazes me. Even after long hours at the studio, she still has a smile on her face and a bounce in her step. She is a woman of both boundless energy and unending generosity. Sometimes I step back and think about our situation, and I wonder how she managed to handle taking in a brand-new teenage niece without breaking stride for a second.

I guess it's testament to her take-things-as-they-come attitude. I don't think I'll ever deal with change as well as she does. Especially not on an empty stomach.

Even from halfway across the room, I can smell the takeout. My belly grumbles at the thought of food, but I tell it to wait.

Aunt Rachel inspects the array of ingredients on the counter. Smiling, she picks up a bright green lime. "Key lime bars again?"

I nod with a grin. "By special request."

I invited Quince to start stopping by after work because hours of hauling and lifting and cutting and loading always leave him famished. His mom works at night, so she leaves a reheatable dinner in the fridge. Now when he gets home, he grabs the container from his fridge and then comes over to eat dinner and cookies. Aunt Rachel and I have always made treats – well, she makes treats and I assist. It's not much trouble to make plenty to share.

We always make extra treats for him to take home to his mom. Quince is practically family, so she is, too. Besides, Aunt Rachel is always very generous with her kitchen.

"Let's get them in the oven." She takes one of the pair of matching homemade aprons, a pale water blue

covered with a rainbow of sea life – she let me pick the fabric, obviously – and quickly knots the neck and waist ties into bows. She hands the other apron to me. "Once they're baking, we can eat dinner. Italian takeout."

Mmm.

Fifteen minutes of sifting, mixing, crumbling and spreading later – with Prithi circling my feet the entire time – the bars are in the oven and Aunt Rachel and I are settled in at the kitchen table with plates full of ravioli and doughsticks. Bread, by the way, is one of my favourite land foods. We can't exactly whip up a loaf in the ocean. Lots of water. No fire. No bread. And on the scale of breads, Italian doughsticks – all soft and warm and drowning in garlic and butter – are at the very top.

I'm just sighing into my third one when Aunt Rachel asks, "Anything interesting happen at school today?"

She forks a bite of mushroom ravioli into her mouth.

I swallow my bite of doughstick. "You mean besides the earthquake?"

"Heavens." Aunt Rachel practically chokes. "The studio was so busy tonight I'd forgotten. Is the school all right?"

"Everything's fine," I reply. I push a chunk of doughstick around in the sauce. "News team had to

make a special announcement for Monday's homeroom broadcast."

"It's so strange," Aunt Rachel says. "They were interviewing a seismologist on the radio, and he said the apparent epicentre is not near any known fault line."

"Did they say where?" I ask. Not that I'll know anything. Despite a full year of earth science with Miss Molina, I'm still pretty clueless when it comes to land-based geology.

"Yes." Aunt Rachel swirls ravioli through her sauce. "About forty miles off the coast. Just west of Bimini."

"What?" I choke.

"Bimini," she repeats. "It's the westernmost island of the Bahamas."

"I know what Bimini is," I explain. "It's in the eastern part of my kingdom."

"Really?" Aunt Rachel takes a sip of her iced tea. "Are earthquakes common in Thalassinia?"

"No," I reply, confused. "Not really."

Most of the underwater quakes in the region hit further south, around the Dominican Republic and Puerto Rico. Tremors in Thalassinia are more like the once-every-few-centuries kind of thing. The last one recorded by our people was about two hundred years ago.

And even then, the quakes aren't strong enough to be felt on the mainland.

"Do you need to send a messenger gull to the palace?" she asks. "To make sure everyone's all right?"

"Yeah, maybe." I shake my head. "We're not anywhere near a fault line, so I don't see how the epicentre could be so close."

Abandoning my ravioli, I head to the window above the sink and slide it open. I make a gull sound into the night, knowing that no ordinary gull would ever respond to my sad excuse for a call. Moments later, a big grey-and-white seagull flies into the kitchen and lands on the counter.

I pull open the junk drawer and grab the pad of kelpaper I keep there just in case. As I scribble a quick note, just asking Daddy if everything is okay and whether he knows anything about the quake, the gull notices the dinner on the table.

"Oh, no, you don't," Aunt Rachel warns, waving her fork at the hungry bird.

I snip a piece of twine and tie the note to the gull's leg before he gets himself forked for going after our dinner. "Take this to King Whelk of Thalassinia, please."

The gull gives one last longing look to the table full of food before flying back into the night. Daddy will

have my note within the hour, and hopefully I'll have an answer shortly after that.

I sit down and resume chewing my ravioli in silence, thinking about all the consequences that *might* have swept our way on land as a result of this huge earthquake. Tsunamis. Mud slides. Whole stretches of the south Florida coast sucked into the sea.

Thankfully, none of this happened.

If huddling in a doorway with Quince and filming a special news report were the worst of the damages, then it was hardly a blip on the disaster scale. Plus I found out about the internship.

"You know Miss Molina?" I ask.

"Wasn't she your earth science teacher?"

"Yep," I say, pushing away my empty plate and grabbing for a fourth doughstick. "After we finished the special report, she told me about an internship programme at Seaview Community College. She thinks I might be able to get in."

"That's wonderful, Lily," she says, patting my hand. "What kind of internship?"

I give her a quick rundown of what I know – which isn't much, I guess, but I'll know more after I study the website and then meet with the director next Saturday. "I might be able to get a scholarship, too," I add. "Which

would be nice, since my grades are garbage and my SAT scores aren't going to be much better."

"You're working on that," Aunt Rachel says. "Between your test-prep classes and your extra study hours with Shannen, I'm sure you'll do far better than you expect."

I hope so.

After I decided to come back to Seaview, to pursue a life on land, I met with the school careers adviser for the first time. She pulled up my records, read through my grades and then gave me a very concerned look. With a grade average in the barely 2.0 range, she'd explained, I would have to do extremely well on the SATs to get into college.

Tests are not my best stroke. I'm far better in the water than I'll ever be in front of a book. But if I want to be anything more than a janitor at the aquarium, then I need college. My life on land needs to be at least as meaningful as my life as queen would have been. I don't think I'd make a great leader, but I do think I could make a decent marine biologist. I know the oceans better than any human, and I am personally invested in protecting and preserving them. If I can make the waters better and safer for my merkin, then my life on land will have served a valuable purpose. What more could a soon-to-be-former princess want?

A sharp knock on the kitchen door washes away my thoughts. I jump up, thrilled. Quince!

Prithi chases after me, batting at my bare feet.

It's not until I'm pulling the door open that I wonder why Quince is knocking when he usually just walks right in. The huge smile on my face disappears as soon as I see who's standing on the other side.

About the Author



Tera Lynn Childs always dreamed of being a mermaid. The closest she got was spending countless hours in the nearest body of water, training to be a competitive swimmer.

Tera still hopes that one day her legs will magically turn into a tail, but until that happens, she can be found blogging and writing wherever she can find a comfy chair and a steady stream of caffeinated beverages.

Fins are Forever is the sequel to *Forgive My Fins*, Tera's first book for Templar Publishing.

www.teralynnchilds.com

Don't miss Lily's first fin-flicking adventure…

Forgive my Fins

by Tera Lynn Childs



'I simply adored this book!'
Alyson Noël, author of The Immortals series

Unrequited love is hard enough when you're a normal teenager, but when you're half-human, half-mermaid, like Lily Sanderson, there's no such thing as a simple crush. Especially when your crush is gorgeous (and 100% human) Brody Bennett.

The problem is, mermaids aren't the casual dating type – the instant they kiss someone, they 'bond' with them for life. When Lily's attempt to win Brody's love leads to a ginormous case of mistaken identity, she finds herself facing a tidal wave of relationship drama.

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