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Opening extract from

Emily Windsnap and the Land of the Midnight Sun

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This book is dedicated to my totally amazing agent, Catherine Clarke, to say thank you for ten years of being a wonderful support, advocate, friend, sounding board and the other hundred and one things you are. And for being the first step on the road to Emily ever making it out into the world. Thank you. Please don't ever retire.



The Return of the Mountain King

I have been dead, I have been lost,
I have been turned to rock and stone.

I have been ice, I have been fire,
I have been all, and some, and none.

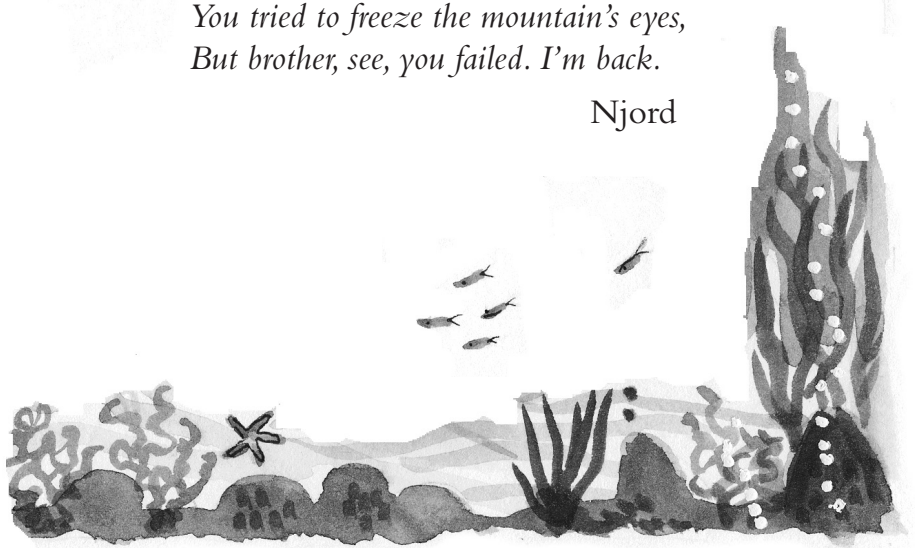
I have been one, I have been gone,
I have been left to wrack and rot.

And yet I melt, and breathe, and live.
I am the secret you forgot.

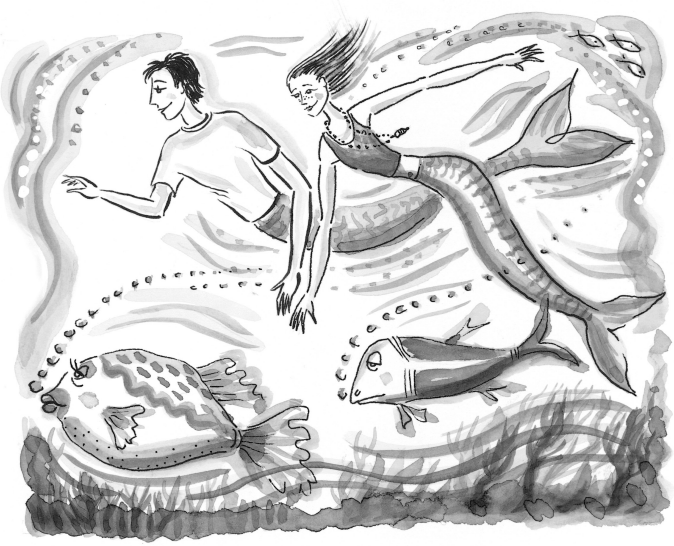
I am the land, the sea, the hills,
The symbols of your fear and lack.

You tried to freeze the mountain's eyes,
But brother, see, you failed. I'm back.

Njord



Chapter One



'We interrupt this programme to bring you a severe weather warning. Flash storms are affecting many coastal regions again this morning. The authorities are advising people living in these areas to avoid going out unless they have to. Coastal roads still flooded from yesterday's downpour will remain closed until further notice.'

Mum switched the TV off and got up to put the kettle on. 'These storms are getting ridiculous,' she said. 'It's the middle of summer! We should be outside sunbathing, not huddled

inside or dashing about under raincoats and umbrellas.'

Mum's best friend Millie nodded at the torn, inside-out brolly standing upside down in the bin. 'Third one I've been through in a week,' she said. 'I wouldn't mind so much if it was just the rain. It's the howling wind I don't like. It's been giving me bad dreams. And the waves crashing over the pier don't exactly help create a calm space for my Meditation and Visualisation group.'

'Meditation and Visualisation' was Millie's new class that she ran from *King*, the boat she lived on near us in Brightport harbour. *King* was our old boat, but we'd moved to a new one when my mum and dad were reunited. Mum's human and Dad's a merman and our boat, *Fortuna*, has been specially adapted so that you can live above and below water on it. I'm a semi-mer – human on land, mermaid in the water – which means I get to live both above *and* under water.

Millie was on week three of her Meditation and Visualisation group. She'd set it up after she'd had what she called 'an enlightened moment of synchronicity'.

'Enlightened moments of synchronicity' are the kinds of things Millie has a lot of. She doesn't worry too much that no one knows what such things actually mean.

'I don't see what the fuss is about,' I said. 'The

storms only last half an hour and the rest of the time the weather's been beautiful.' I glanced out of the window. 'Look, it's clearing up already.'

Mum and Millie exchanged a look.

'What?' I asked.

Mum reached for a couple of mugs and put a tea bag in one of them. 'Well, I'm not surprised *you* can look on the bright side,' she said, a hint of a smile twitching the corners of her mouth.

'What d'you mean?'

'She means it's funny how everything looks rosier to those of us who have got a *boyfriend*,' Millie said. Then she cackled with laughter and got up from the sofa. 'Only teasing, lovey, don't worry,' she went on, squeezing my cheek as she passed me. 'Earl Grey for me, Mary P,' she added, joining Mum in the kitchen.

'Whatever,' I said, turning away from them both, so they couldn't see the flames creeping up my cheeks – or the smile that I was finding it hard to keep off my face.

But they were right. I was finding it hard to look on the downside of *anything* at the moment. So what if it rained a bit? Who cared? As far as I was concerned, my world was full of sunshine.

And yes, it *was* because of Aaron. My boyfriend.

I still felt a bit weird calling him that, and I hadn't actually used the word out loud yet – especially to him! But I said it in my head – a lot. And I liked it.

Rap rappity rappity rap! A tap at the door broke me from my thoughts. I recognised the knock, and right on cue, my cheeks burned again.

Mum reached the door just ahead of me. 'Hello, Aaron,' she said with a big smile. 'We were just talking about you.'

Aaron glanced past Mum to catch my eye. 'Were you?' he asked shyly.

I squeezed past Mum. 'See you later,' I said as I kissed her cheek.

'Be careful out there,' she warned.

'It's fine. Look – the storm's finished already. Told you it wouldn't last long.' I headed down the jetty with Aaron.

'Have fun with your boyfriend!' Millie trilled from inside the boat.

I stole a glance at Aaron. 'Sorry about them,' I mumbled.

He smiled. 'I don't mind,' he said, 'if you don't.'

I looked down, too embarrassed to meet his eyes. 'No, I suppose I don't mind either,' I said to the wooden slats of the jetty.

Aaron reached out a hand without saying anything else, and I slipped my hand into his as we walked. As I did, I felt my whole body tingle and heat up. I'd never felt anything like the way I felt when Aaron held my hand. It was as if someone was tickling all my nerve endings at the same time. It made me want to jump up and down and burst out laughing.

We'd only met this year. Aaron used to live with his mum in a castle out at sea, but they'd recently moved to Brightport with us. We'd put on an amazing concert recently, and ever since that night – when he'd kissed me – I'd felt this way.

I didn't tell him, of course. The only person I'd said anything to was my best friend, Shona.

'You're in LOVE!' she'd squealed delightedly when I'd told her. Shona is the most traditional, soppy mermaid in the entire world, and loves nothing more than a good romance.

'Don't be ridiculous!' I'd said at the time. 'I'm too young to be in love. I don't even know what it means.' Like her, I was nearly thirteen – *way* too young to start thinking about things like love.

But I did find myself wondering about the word. And I *was* aware that there was nothing I liked more than being with Aaron. I was also aware that lately this had meant I hadn't seen as much of Shona as usual. And I had the feeling it was becoming a sore point.

I wasn't sure if she was bored of being the odd one out, or fed up with me talking about him, or maybe even a tiny bit jealous. Either way, she'd stopped asking me about Aaron. And whenever I tried to talk about him, she'd changed the subject or swum off to do something else.

I didn't really blame her. I must have become quite boring, talking about Aaron all the time. And

to be honest, I missed hanging out with her. The only trouble was, I always wanted to hang out with Aaron *more*.

'What do you want to do?' Aaron asked now, as we walked up the jetty.

What I really wanted to do was go to the Rushton's fairground and take a ride on the ghost train so we could sit really close and hold hands in the dark. We'd been on it the other night, and even though it was the tamest ride in the world, I'd pretended to be scared so that Aaron would put his arm round me. It felt so nice I didn't want the ride to end. Unfortunately it did though, and since then I hadn't managed to find another excuse to snuggle up close to him.

But I hadn't seen Shona since the beginning of the week, and it was Friday now.

'Shall we go to Shiprock?' I suggested. Shiprock was the merfolk town under the sea where Shona lived.

'Sure!' Aaron agreed, and we walked down the beach to the water's edge.

Aaron waded into the water. I looked around nervously.

'It's fine,' he said. 'Come on.' Then he turned away and ran, splashing and jumping, into the water.

I still hadn't got used to the fact that we didn't have to hide what we were any more. It was only last year that I'd discovered I became a mermaid

when I went in water – and for most of the time since then, it had been a secret. Neptune, who ruled the seas, used to be really strict about these things. For years and years, he'd kept the human and mer worlds apart and used a memory drug to make humans forget if they ever saw a mermaid. He even had laws that said humans and merpeople couldn't mix. My dad had been sent to prison because he'd married my mum!

But everything had changed recently. Neptune had decreed that humans and merpeople *had* to get on together. And he'd got rid of the memory drug – at least in Brightport – so everyone knew about merpeople and we no longer had any reason to hide.

Even so, it still felt weird to go into the water without panicking about what would happen if someone saw my tail.

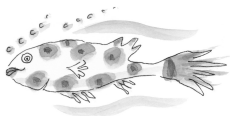
'What are you waiting for?' Aaron called to me. Then he ducked under and flicked his tail above the waves. As he dived down, his tail shone like silver in the bright sunlight that was beaming down on us now that the morning's storm was over.

Aaron was a semi-mer like me, and his ease in the water reminded me how much I loved it, too. I shrugged off my worries and ran into the sea to join him.

Within seconds, I felt my body begin to change. First, the familiar tingle in my toes; then my legs

went numb and joined together; finally, my legs disappeared altogether, my clothes melted away, and in their place my tail formed. I swished it around, stretching it out and spinning in the water to join Aaron.

We swam along side by side, and I smiled to myself and wondered if I had ever felt so happy in my whole life.



Shona's mum hovered in the door of their home in Shiprock Caves, and smiled apologetically. 'Sorry, Emily, Shona went out earlier with some of her school friends.'

'No worries,' I said. 'We'll find her.'

She went inside and Aaron and I swam back down the tunnel and out to the open sea. A line of silver fish followed us, swimming just below me and tickling my tummy as I swam.

'Now what?' Aaron asked.

I had a tiny pang of jealousy at the thought of Shona playing out with other friends – till I remembered I had no right to feel jealous. *I* was the one who kept abandoning *her* to be with Aaron. I could hardly complain if she chose to hang out with some of her friends from Shiprock. Real friends who didn't drop her when they got a boyfriend.

Then I had an idea. 'I know where she might be.'

The water grew colder as we made our way out to sea. Fish glanced furtively at us as we passed.

'Look,' Aaron said, laughing, as two fish swam towards us. One was fat and yellow with a purple blotch all over its face. It looked like a grand lady who'd smudged her lipstick. The other one had black and white stripes the length of its long body. It swam elegantly beside her, like an obedient butler.

We swam through a couple of arches in the rocks, going lower and lower till we came to a huge rug of brown seaweed flapping lazily in the tide.

'What's this place?' Aaron asked as we swam across the seaweed to a sandy patch covered in fishing nets, old bicycles and oil drums.

'It's our playground,' I said, swimming through a large tube and indicating for him to follow me.

We swam to the end of the tube and looked round; Shona wasn't there. Half of me was disappointed – but the other half felt relieved. At least she hadn't shared our special playground with all her other friends. Plus it meant I was free to carry on being alone with Aaron.

'Hey, look at this,' he called, swimming across to a black sheet at the far end of the playground. I hadn't seen it before.

I swam over to join him. 'What is it?'

'Looks like a sail to me.'

'A black sail?'

Aaron grinned. 'Must be from a pirate ship! Let's check it out.'

He lifted a corner for me, and my heart flipped like a silver fish flapping its fins. Maybe I *would* get to snuggle up to Aaron in the darkness after all!

The sand scattered below me as I swam down, and the sail wafted upwards, swishing with the tide. I swam onwards, only stopping when I heard Aaron call out.

I turned back. He wasn't there.

'Aaron?'

No reply.

'Aaron?' I called louder. 'You OK?'

Still nothing.

I started swimming back to the edge of the sail, but my tail snagged on something. A piece of seaweed? I twisted round to see what it was. As I turned, the seaweed pinched harder. My tail was completely stuck. A moment later, something grabbed me round my middle.

And then the world went black.

