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Opening extract from

The Tail of Emily Windsnap

Written by

Liz Kessler

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The Tail of Emily Windsnap

LIZ KESSLER

Decorations by Sarah Gibb

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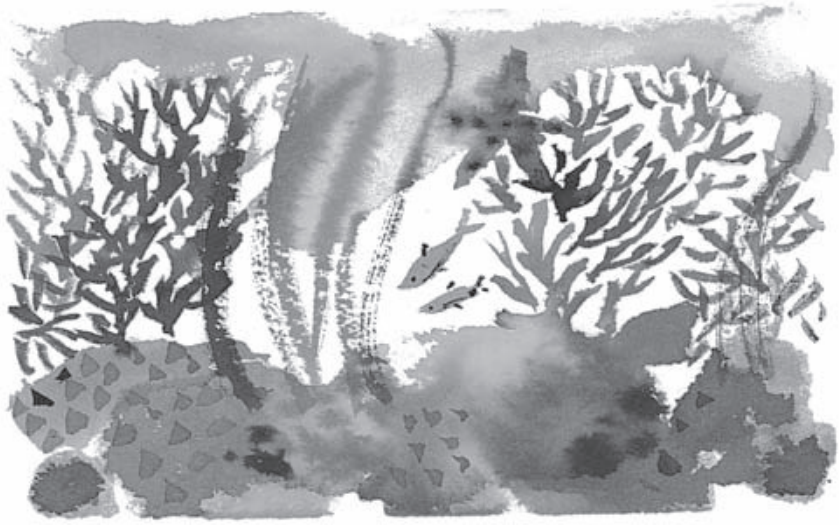
For Frankie, Lucy and Emily
And for Dad



Come, dear children, let us away;
Down and away below.
Now my brothers call from the bay;
Now the great winds shoreward blow;
Now the salt tides seaward flow;
Now the wild white horses play,
Champ and chafe and toss in the spray.
Children dear, let us away.
This way, this way!

from The Forsaken Merman,
by Matthew Arnold

Chapter One

Can you keep a secret?

I know everyone has secrets but mine's different. Kind of weird. Sometimes I have nightmares where I get found out and locked up in a zoo or a scientist's laboratory.

It all started in Year Seven when swimming lessons began. It was the first Wednesday afternoon at my new school and I was so looking forward to it. Mum hates swimming and always used to change the subject when I asked why I couldn't learn.

‘But we live on a boat!’ I’d say. ‘We’re surrounded by water!’

‘You’re not getting me in there,’ she’d reply. ‘Just look at all the pollution. You know what it’s like when the day cruises have been in. Now stop arguing and come and help me with the vegetables.’

She even kept me out of swimming lessons all the way through primary school. Said it was unhealthy. ‘All those bodies mixing in the same water,’ she’d shudder, ‘not for *us* thank you very much.’

And that would be that: end of discussion. I finally wore her down the summer before I started secondary school. ‘All right, all right,’ she sighed, eventually. ‘I give in. Just don’t start trying to get *me* in there with you.’

I’d never been in the sea. I’d never even had a bath. I’m not dirty or anything – I have a shower every night. But there isn’t enough room for a bath on the boat, so I’d never been totally *immersed* in water.

Till the first Wednesday afternoon of Year Seven.

Mum bought me a new bag especially for my costume and towel. On the side, it had a picture of a woman doing front crawl. I looked at the picture and dreamed about winning Olympic races, with a Speedo costume and black goggles just like hers.

Only it didn't quite happen like that.

When we got to the baths, a man with a whistle and white shorts and a red T-shirt told the girls to go in one room and the boys to go in the other.

I changed quickly in the corner. I didn't want anyone to see my skinny body. My legs are like sticks and they're usually covered in scabs and grazes from getting on and off *The King of the Sea*. That's our boat. Which is a bit of a grand title for a little sailing boat with mouldy ropes, peeling paint and beds the width of a ruler. But anyway. We usually just call it *King*.

Julie Crossens smiled at me as she put her clothes in her locker. 'I like your cozzy,' she said. It's just plain black with a white stripe across the middle.

'I like your hat,' I smiled back as she squashed her hair into her tight, pink swimming cap. I squeezed my ponytail under mine. I usually wear my hair loose; Mum made me put it in a bobble today. It's mousy brown and used to be short but I'm growing it at the moment. It's a bit longer than shoulder length so far.

Julie and I sit next to each other sometimes. We're not best friends. Sharon Matterson used to be my best friend but she went to Our Lady. I'm at Brightport High. Julie's the only person I might want to be best friends with. I think she wants to be Mandy Rushton's, though. They hang out together at break.

I don't mind. Not really. Except when I can't find my way to the canteen – or to some of the classes. It might be nice to have someone to get lost with.

Brightport High is about ten times bigger than my primary school! It's like an enormous maze, with MILLIONS of boys and girls who all seem to know what they're doing.

'You coming, Julie?' Mandy Rushton stood between us with her back to me. She gave me a quick look, then she whispered something in Julie's ear and laughed. Julie didn't look up as they passed me.

Mandy lives on the pier, like me. Her parents run the amusement arcade and they've got a flat above it. We used to be quite friendly till last year when I accidentally told my mum that Mandy had showed me how to win free goes on the one-armed bandit. I didn't *mean* to get her in trouble but – well, let's just say I'm not exactly welcome in the amusements any more. In fact, she hasn't spoken to me ever since.

And now we've ended up in the same class at Brightport High. Brilliant. As if starting a new school the size of a city isn't bad enough.

I finished getting ready on my own.

'OK, listen up, 7C,' the man with the whistle said. He told us to call him Bob. 'Any of you kids totally confident to swim on your own?'

'Course we can – we're not babies!' Mandy sneered under her breath.

Bob turned to face her. 'All right then. Do you

want to start us off? Let's see what you can do.'

Mandy stepped towards the pool. She stuck her thumb in her mouth. 'Ooh, look at me. I'm a baby. I can't swim!' Then she dropped herself sideways into the water. Her thumb still in her mouth, she pretended to slip under as she did this really over the top kind of doggy paddle across the pool.

Half the class were laughing by the time she reached the end.

Bob wasn't. His face reddened. 'Do you think that's funny? Get out! Now!' he shouted. Mandy pulled herself out and grinned as she bowed to the class.

'You *silly* girl,' Bob handed her a towel. 'You can sit on the side and watch.'

'*What?*' Mandy stopped grinning. 'That's not fair! What did I do?'

Bob turned his back on her. 'Now, we'll start again. Who's happy to swim confidently *and* sensibly?'

About three-quarters of the class raised their hands. I was desperate to get in the pool but didn't dare put mine up. Not after that.

'Right then.' Bob nodded at them. 'You can get in if you want – but just in the shallow end, mind.'

He turned back to the rest of the class who were lined up and shivering by the side of the pool. 'I'll start with this lot.'

Once his back was turned, I couldn't stop myself. I sneaked in with the group making their way

round to the shallow end! I'd never swum before so I shouldn't have, but I just knew I could do it. And the water looked *so* beautiful lying there, still and calm, as though it was holding its breath waiting for someone to jump in and set it alive with splashes and ripples.

There were five big steps that led gradually into the water. I stepped onto the first one and warm water tickled over my toes. Another step and the water wobbled over my knees. Two more, then I pushed myself into the water.

I ducked my head under, reaching wide with my arms. As I held my breath and swam deeper, the silence of the water surrounded me and called to me, drawing my body through its creamy calm. It was as if I'd found a new home.

'Now THAT is more like it!' Bob shouted when I came up for air. 'You're a natural!'

Then he turned back to the others, squinting and staring at me with open mouths. Mandy's eyes fired hatred at me as Bob said, 'That's what I'd like to see you *all* doing by the end of the term.'

And then it happened.

One minute, I was skimming along like a flying fish. The next, my legs suddenly seized up. It felt as though someone had glued my thighs together and strapped a splint on my shins! I tried to smile as I paddled to the side but my legs had turned to a block of stone! I couldn't feel my knees, my feet, my toes. *What was happening?*

A second later, I almost went under completely and I screamed. Bob dived in, in his shorts and T-shirt, and swam over to me.

'It's my legs,' I gasped. 'I can't feel them!'

He cupped my chin in his big hand and back-stroked us to the side. 'Don't worry,' he said, looking behind us as he swam. 'It's just cramp. Happens to everyone.'

We reached the big steps at the side of the pool and sat down on the top one. As soon as I was halfway out of the water, the weird feeling started to go away.

'Now, let's have a look at those legs.' Bob lifted me onto the side of the pool. 'Can you lift your left one up?' I did.

'And your right?' Easy.

'Any pain?'

'It's gone,' I said.

'Just a bit of cramp, then. Why don't you have a rest here for a few minutes? Get in again when you're ready?'

I nodded and he went back to the others.

But I'd felt something that he hadn't seen. And I'd seen something that he hadn't felt. And I didn't have a *clue* what it was but I knew one thing for sure – you wouldn't get me back in that pool for a million pounds.

I sat by the side for a long time. All the rest of the class eventually got in and started splashing about. Even Mandy was allowed back in. But I didn't want to sit too near in case I got splashed and it happened again. I was even nervous when I went home after school in case I fell off the jetty into the sea.

The jetties are all along one side of the pier. There are three other boats on ours. A posh white speed-boat and a couple of bigger yachts. None of the others have people living on them though.

I stepped onto the jetty. We've got this old plank of wood that we put across to the boat. Mum used to carry me over it when I was little but I'd been doing it on my own for ages. Only, I couldn't that day. I called her from the jetty.

'I can't get across,' I shouted when she came up from below deck.

She had a towel wrapped round her head and a satin dressing-gown on. 'I'm getting ready for my book group.'

I stood frozen on the jetty. Around me, the boats melted into a wobbly mass of poles and sails. I stared at *King.* The sail was down. The mast rocked with the boat, the wooden deck shiny with sea spray. My eyes blurred as I focused on the row of portholes along the side of the boat; the thin metal bar running round the edge. 'I'm scared,' I said.

Eventually, Mum pulled the dressing-gown cord tighter round her waist and reached her skinny arm

out to me. 'Come on then, let's have you.'

When I got across, she grabbed me and gave me a hug. 'Dingbat,' she said, ruffling my hair. Then she went back inside to get ready for her group.

Mum's always got some group or other on the go. Last year it was pilates; now it's her book group. She works at the secondhand bookshop on the promenade. That's where they meet. It's pretty cool, actually. They've just opened up a café bar where you can get thick milkshakes with real fruit in them and huge wodges of chocolate flapjack. I reckon the book group is just her latest excuse to meet up and gossip with her friends – but at least it keeps her off my back.

Mystic Millie who does Palms on the Pier comes and sits with me. Millie's all right. Sometimes she practises reiki or shiatsu on me. She brought her tarot cards round once. Said I was about to achieve academic success and win praise from all quarters. The next day I came bottom in the spelling test and was given three lunchtime detentions to catch up. But that's Millie for you.

Luckily, *Emmerdale* and *EastEnders* were both on tonight so I knew she wouldn't bother me. Just as well because I wanted to be left alone. I needed time to think about what to do. There were two things I knew for sure. One: I had to work out what had happened to me in the pool. And two: I needed to get out of swimming lessons before it happened again.