

Wolves, Wails and Mermaid Tails

The bathroom was off limits again. Dad always put a padlock on the door when Mum was having a bath. Anna didn't know why exactly. She'd grown used to seeing the big, brass padlock dangling there, with a keyhole big enough to poke her pinky finger in.



‘She’s hiding something,’ her friend Olivia said.

‘No one does that kind of thing in normal homes.’

Anna thought about the way her dad would tell her to go watch television, or read, and NOT to linger. He was always firm about it, but with a ghost of smile on his lips, as if to keep her from feeling curious or concerned.

The reason behind her dad’s behaviour hadn’t bothered Anna until her discussion with Olivia during their lunch break. Now, alarm bells were ringing in her head.

‘Mum locks Dad away too,’ she admitted worriedly.

‘In the bathroom?’ Olivia wondered, biting on a ham and lettuce roll oozing with mayonnaise.

‘No. In the shed at night sometimes.’

‘The SHED?’

‘I’ve seen them,’ Anna enthused. ‘Perhaps he’s working on a secret project?’

‘That’s BIZARRE,’ Olivia concluded. ‘You really should find out what they’re up to. It’s all very odd, Anna.’

That same night, when as Anna was eating up all her burnt fish fingers and chips, her dad put the brass padlock onto the bathroom door as usual. When he’d finished, he swirled the big key around his finger and headed downstairs.

Anna moved from the shadows of her room and closer to the bathroom door. She could hear the swishing of the water from within.

‘Mum?’ she called.

‘I’m in here!’ her mum yelled back in a short, sharp tone. ‘If you need something, ask your father!’

Anna huffed and stomped away.

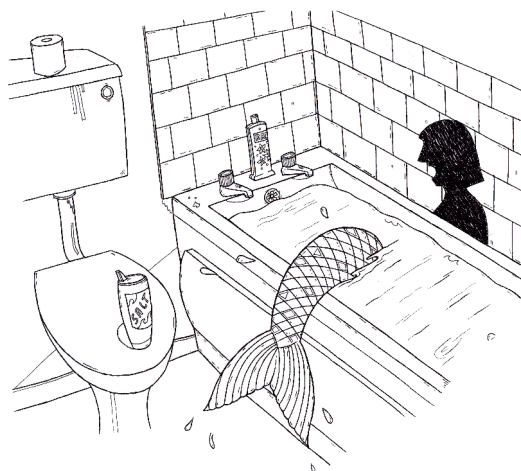
But then she noticed something out of place. The key – the big, brass, fancy key – was lying on a step about half way down. Her dad must have dropped it when he’d slipped it into the gaping jaws of his trouser pocket.

Anna strained to listen for him. He was in the kitchen, clinking and clunking around, making his last, strong tea of the evening.

PERFECT!

She snatched it up and, without a second thought, placed it into the key hole. The splashing from inside was loud – loud enough to swallow the sound of the key *snicking*. Anna carefully put the

padlock on the carpet and then slowly inched open the door. She didn't want to see her mum in nothing but skin, but there was something digging away at her that she needed to understand. A



nagging feeling she had since she was very small...

The moment she entered, she saw her mum's face submerged in water – her eyes closed. Her hair floated around her face in long, red wisps of beauty. But instead of legs, there was a tail of many

colours, curling out of the tub like a lost rainbow.

Anna gasped, but clamped a hand over her mouth just in time to muffle it.

A carton of sea salt stood on the closed lid of the toilet with its top popped open. There were granules on the edge of the bath, as if her mum had been pouring it into the water.

Anna took tiny steps backwards before her mum could open her eyes. She slipped out the door, putting the lock quickly back into place.

Anna hadn't told a soul about her mum's tail. She'd bitten her tongue when Olivia spoke of an upcoming seaside holiday to Weymouth with her parents. She had to clamp her mouth shut when her mum had picked up the salt at dinner too.

It was difficult keeping quiet when all she wanted to do was squeal in excitement and see her mum's tail in closer detail.

And not forgetting... what of her dad's secrets?

There was still so much she didn't know.

Days had passed and Anna watched from her bedroom window as her dad went into the garden shed. The moon was fat and glowing bright and her mum was looking hurried. She stood on the balls of her feet to kiss him farewell and locked the shed behind him.

Anna looked at them both now, in the eerie light that filled their garden of buttercups and daisies. Running down the stairs two at a time – as if a fleet of ghosts were chasing her – she'd decided

ENOUGH was ENOUGH.

‘I know!’ she declared from the wide open patio doors. She was wearing her nightgown and her toes were being bitten by the cold air.

Her mum looked startled as she pocketed the key to the same padlock that they used on the bathroom door. ‘Anna! What are you doing out here? You should be in bed, young lady!’

‘I know you’re a MERMAID!’ she blurted.

Her mum rushed over, glancing quickly at the neighbour’s window, but stopped a short distance from Anna at an almighty BANG!

The shed shook.

‘Mum?’

‘It’s okay,’ she insisted.

The shed rocked with a *creak* of its wooden

frame and a muffled wailing sounded in the night.



Suddenly, the door burst open with a cracking of its wooden planks. A shadow emerged, huge and bristly. In the moonlight, Anna could make out the glint of teeth and a sizeable tail beating the air.

Anna's mum swept her up into her arms and held her close.

‘We have to save Dad!’

‘Anna,’ her mum said, speaking in a soothing voice, ‘Anna that IS your dad.’

‘But he...’

‘He’s a werewolf,’ she said matter-of-factly. Her dad considered them both with a low whine in the back of his throat. He continued through his little vegetable patch and sloped over the garden wall. ‘There’s nothing we can do. He’ll hunt and return in the morning.’



‘But the lock...?’

‘He’s got out before,’ she explained. ‘But he doesn’t eat people. I promise. Just animals. It’s safe.’

‘Then why do you lock him up if he’s SAFE?’
Anna implored.

Her mum’s eyes darkened and her face became

serious. ‘Because it’s what *normal* people will do to him if they catch him as a wolf that I fear most.’

Anna didn’t sleep a wink that night. She waited until the padding of four paws could be heard against the decking outside. In the early hours, she crept downstairs and found her dad curled up on the floor, sleeping like a dog would in a basket. His fur had vanished and his teeth were in neat, less pointy rows now. His human ears pricked up as she approached and he yawned.

Anna couldn’t help but reach out a hand and pet him on the tangled mess of his brown hair, to show how happy she was to see him home safe. He didn’t think her weird for it either.

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Over breakfast, they spoke about her mum's life in the ocean and her dad getting bitten by an unknown werewolf passing through town.

'Your dad found me by the sea one night. He saw my tail and I thought the worst, but he kept coming back just to watch me and wave. That's how I knew he was a good man. He never told a soul about me and we fell deeply in love,' her mum said, buttering toast. 'But he was attacked when he came to visit me one night.'

'A rogue wolf was hunting,' her dad said. 'It went for your mum because he could smell her scales and thought she was nothing more than a meal. When I pulled his tail to get him off her, he bit me and ran. I have changed every full moon after that night.' He took a slice of toast from Mum.

‘Then you arrived, Anna, so we locked ourselves away. We didn’t want you to be *afraid* of us.’

Anna had barely touched her cereal. ‘But... what does that make me?’

Her parents looked at each other.

‘We don’t know,’ they said in unison.

Anna kept their secrets in return for adventures in the woods on her dad’s back. She would sit atop his thick, brown fur and they would ride off into the night together, wailing and crying at the moon. Anna would point out rabbits for him to pounce on, turning her back when he snapped them up hungrily into his mouth. She also kept a keen eye on the woods, for hunters or strangers that might see them.

One night, all three of them visited the same spot where Anna's mum and dad had fallen in love. Her dad sat in the sand in wolf form, watching over his two favourite girls with the moonlight reflecting in his dark – almost jet black – eyes.

Anna marvelled at the long rainbow tail that had appeared where her mum's legs had been the moment she'd dipped them into the salty sea water. Anna followed her into the gentle waves and touched the slippery scales in curiosity.

'They're beautiful,' Anna said.

She waded out some more – nervous at first – and dived, feeling the cold rush of the sea against her face. Her skin tingled and her legs felt powerful all of a sudden, as if she could swim miles and not feel tired.

And when she surfaced, her mum's mouth had formed an O.

'Look-' she choked out.

Anna glanced down.

Instead of legs, she had a mermaid's tail.

Not a shiny, slick tail with scales every colour of the rainbow.

It was a big, brown, HAIRY one...