

Weeki Wachee, City of Live Mermaids

Bronwyn Torvald looked at the blood on her fingertip and was suddenly unsure whether to sign the contract. A ray of Florida sunshine filtered in through the Venetian blinds. For a moment, the sun mirrored her reflection in the beveled pearl of blood. In it, she could see all her futures unfolding. The impatient click of fingertips drumming across the top of the desk reminded her, *Bronwyn, your life is a blank slate – choose wisely.*

Lucinda Light drummed her manicured fingernails across the edge of the desk and leaned back. Sunshine bounced and wove its way through each coil and fold of the neat French twist at the nape of her neck. The hair funneled up, like a gilded water devil pinned tightly to her crown. She waited for the girl to make a decision.

It's a commitment, she'd explained. This isn't your ordinary profession. But it's one I think you can be born into – born again – like when you took your baptism. Except this is something that you can actually believe in, when the waters come up over you. She'd pushed the contract across the table to Bronwyn. *I think you're ready to get reborn, don't you?* Bronwyn nodded.

Lucinda had pricked her finger with a letter opener, whose handle was the shape of a mermaid's tail and inset with cut green rhinestones. *If you need to take a minute to think before you sign it, I understand,* she told the girl who sat across from her, lost in a bead of blood unfolding fortune after fortune in the reflection of the sun. *But don't take too long.*

In the pearl of blood on her fingertip, Bronwyn Torvald saw herself diving. She saw the shapely curve of her calves, the rounded dimples of her ankles, the sturdy muscles of her thighs, the arch and roots of each toe on her foot. The strength of these legs had carried her away from Lebanon Junction, across the Withlacoochee River, through Citrus County and Hernando, straight to Weeki Wachee – the one place on that god-forsaken stretch of U.S. 19 that sang out to her, calling her home. Bronwyn saw those legs and their journey reflected back in the sunlit blood on her fingertip. Every other un-lived future dimmed just a little, like the tunnels of an underwater cavern that don't feed back up to the surface. Bronwyn wicked the blood up into the nib of the fountain pen. With the curling flourish of the capital *B* of her first name, she swam away from a hundred different fingers of her future, pulled into the strongest current she'd ever known.

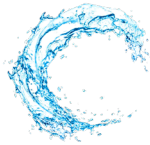




Weeki Wachee Springs isn't just another roadside distraction on your Florida road map – we put the Gulf Coast ON the map! Conveniently located about an hour north of Tampa, just south of Homosassa Springs at the crossroads of U.S. 19 and State Road 50, Weeki Wachee welcomes YOU home! We're one of Old Florida's most beloved and historic roadside destinations, drawing more visitors each year to visit our amazing MERMAIDS!

Weeki Wachee is the enchanted entrance to the magical sapphire water world of our own Floridian mermaids, serene manatees, river fish and playful turtles! The springs of Weeki Wachee run so deep that no one has ever been able to find the bottom – but our girls tell us that's where they swim up from, to join us daily in the Mermaid Theater! Every day, regular as a clock or the tides, almost 120 million gallons of crystal-clear water bubbles up out of subterranean caverns – brought in on the fins of the thirty-five beautiful mermaids who call Weeki Wachee home!

So come join us in Weeki Wachee Springs and see for yourself that magic and mermaids are real in the Kingdom of the Sun! Come to Weeki Wachee – where the wishes your heart makes really DO come true!



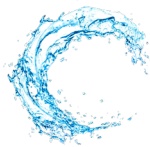
Bronwyn wound the dial on her mother’s good egg timer and set it carefully on the edge of the bathtub. She sank herself to the bottom, until the thrum of her blood and the gentle lap of the water against the sides were the only sounds she could hear anymore, ticking in time with the seconds that clocked the strength of her lungs. She opened her eyes, forcing herself to see through the lens of water. Above her, the surface of the bathwater tucked and rippled. Next to the ventilation grate, a tea-colored water stain mushroomed out towards the hazy skylight. With each undulation of the water, the stain moved like a cloud in the sky, folding and drawing itself to resemble a stone, a bird, a kite, a cup, a pony – then finally, a fish, leaping upstream, launching itself out of the water and into the air.

At 60 seconds, Bronwyn’s nostrils flared, and she struggled to keep them sealed against the invading pressure of the bathwater. At 90 seconds, her lungs began to burn, pushing back against the compression of her body and its instinct to free itself and float up to the surface. At 96 seconds, she felt the struggle of her limbs, fighting against her wish to stay under. She pushed herself back down, and felt the world go a little bit black around the edges. When bright orbs, like the little bubbles in the skylight glass, began to appear and pop at the backs of her eyelids, she felt her mother’s round heels pounding down the hallway, and then the earthquake of a

closed fist hammering against the door. At 111 seconds, her mother yanked Bronwyn out of the water again, howling and crying just like the first time she came unwillingly into this world from the water.

Bronwyn's mother slapped her across the cheek – hard – before choking on a sob and folding Bronwyn into a hug that crushed her chest with a pressure not unlike than the bathwater. *Just what the hell you think you're doing, girl? You coulda drowned yourself! And what's my good egg timer doing in here?* At seven years old, living in a decrepit house, haunted by a photograph of the father she'd never met hung on the wall next to a crucifix whose paint was forever peeling from the humidity, Bronwyn didn't yet have the words to tell her mother that she just wanted to go home. So instead, she told her the only thing that she thought her mother might understand: *I was just practicing for the Rites of Mermaidhood, Momma. You can't be a mermaid unless you can hold your breath underwater for two and a half minutes.*

Even though it was the peak of the July heatwave, Bronwyn shivered. The toes of her tiny feet grew numb in the puddle she dripped onto the warped linoleum of the bathroom floor.



Lucinda Light held out her hand to greet the doe-eyed girl waiting patiently on the office steps. *You must be Bronwyn.* The girl looked down at the ground, nodding. Lucinda locked up and tucked the tiny key into one of the even tinier pockets of her smart, tropical-print dress. *There's more to being a mermaid than just putting on a pretty smile and wiggling your tail underwater,* she said, leading Bronwyn around the path towards the Mermaid Lagoon. *Myself,*

I've been a mermaid for over fifteen years. We have a saying here: Once a mermaid; always a mermaid. You don't actually ever retire – you just stop performing. The mermaids of yesteryear are the backbone of the park. We all have our place.

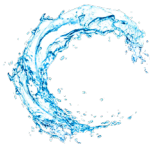
She paused next to the tiger lilies, whose stems stretched high, bending toward the sun. A spring-green starburst was at the center of every flower, with each of its petals tiger-spotted and tipped blood-red. Lucinda plucked one from the stalk, smoothed Bronwyn's hair behind her ear, and pinned it with the blossom. *There now, the tiger lily really shows off all your pretty auburn hair, now don't it?* They sat down on a narrow wooden bench, looking at the mid-morning sun, glittering across the top of the spring. *So, tell me, Bronwyn: how long have you heard Weeki Wachee calling? Me, I knew that I was meant to be a mermaid from before I could even tell anyone that something was missing, that this body I was born into wasn't the right one – I had legs where I knew fins were supposed to be – and couldn't rightly explain that to anyone.*

Bronwyn watched the sunlight rocking over the surface of the spring, reached into her memory, itself a bottomless, subterranean cave, and searched for an answer. From her seat on the bench, she could see the mermaids practicing. They looked like dolls at this distance. Their tails were so much bigger, shinier and slicker, that Bronwyn had ever imagined. Every fin colored as brightly as a beta fish but dancing, instead of fighting. Bronwyn's breath caught in her throat, and she forgot the answer that she'd been carefully parsing together.

Without breaking the spell, Bronwyn whispered, *Since forever. I almost drowned myself in the bathtub, once, because I was practicing for the Rites of Mermaidhood.* Lucinda nodded. *I think that you're ready to come back to the office with me, Bronwyn. One last thing, before you*

sign. Lucinda stood up and tucked a wayward strand of Bronwyn's hair back behind her ear.
That flower really does suit you.

In the waters below, the mermaids were still practicing. But as they emerged from the spring, they became something else. Their costumes weren't fabric, Bronwyn realized, but the scales and skin of a fish. Their tails cleaved and divided like water rippling. From one sturdy flipper into thighs, then knees, then calves, ankles, and feet. Shiny stripes of flipper, fin and scales melted, unformed and remodeled into a pair of legs, from toe to hip. The colorful plates of mermaid tails became a web of scales, then skin, then legs. The transformation was as natural as sand washed back into the ocean. *What magic,* Bronwyn thought, blinking into the sun.

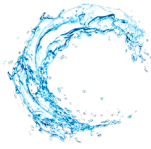


The chlorinated water of the YMCA pool stung Bronwyn's eyes, but it wasn't enough to keep her away. The chemicals weren't as painful as the thought of a day without water. She dove toward the light at the bottom of the deep end. Under six feet of filtered water, the laughs and whoops of the children were like echoes. Bronwyn wove her fingertips through the thick metal grate on the bottom and counted off the seconds that marked the progress and endurance of her lungs. *One Mississippi, two Mississippi, three Mississippi...* she crossed her legs and used both arms to anchor herself. The lifeguards were used to her, and had long ago stopped diving in, thinking she was drowning at the bottom of the deepest end of the pool.

It was a two-mile trek back from the YMCA, and Bronwyn was never in a rush to get home. Momma usually pulled the graveyard shift at the Red Onion Diner, serving up coffee and

blue-plate specials to truckers hauling their loads up to Georgia. As Bronwyn had gotten older, she swam deeper and deeper beneath the surface, in search of the quiet that only came underwater, floating. She wished for gills where she had been born with lungs, and fins in the places she found feet. Cutting along the railroad tracks, she practiced holding her breath, though it was not the same above as below – *one-hundred twenty-two Mississippi, one-hundred twenty-three Mississippi, one-hundred twenty-four Mississippi*. When she finally got back home, she pulled the beaded chain on the kitchen light and popped the cap off a bottle of Grapico – “*The Official Pop Of The Weeki Wachee Mermaids*.” She sat down to do her homework while supper heated up in the oven. Bronwyn ate from a television tray with the glowing faces of Jesus on the cross and her dead father looking down on her plate of meatloaf and mushy peas. After supper, she took a bath.

Through the bubbled glass of the skylight, the moon was a bright white pearl, bobbing along the tide in an ocean of black sky. Bronwyn pushed back with her hands, eyes open and staring up at the edge of the constellations. Momma’s old egg timer, perched on the sink above, clicked off the seconds as she counted backwards underwater. *One-hundred-thirty Mississippi*: she came up for air, gasping like a fish for the very thing she wished she didn’t need. Again, and again. She counted backwards and forwards until the water ran cold, and the pads of her fingers were wrinkled. She brushed her teeth and sat on her bed with a wide-toothed comb, working out the snarls and tangles from all that pool water from her waist-length auburn hair. She plaited it into two thick braids and sank back into the pillow, wishing it were water, dreaming herself legless and without boundaries.



Can you believe that just a few years ago, this spring was full of rusted-out refrigerators and abandoned cars? Lucinda asked, gesturing to the mouth of the Mermaid Theater. *Why, when Newt first came here, there wasn't anything but gators and black bears – just a little two-lane road, with not even a gas station for miles! But we changed all that.* Lucinda walked up the steps to the office and pulled the tiny key out of one of the even tinier pockets stitched into the seams of her pink floral dress. She gestured for Bronwyn to have a seat. *Can I get you a bottle of Grapico?* she asked. Lucinda set a pop bottle on the desk and walked to the window, adjusting the blinds so that just a few threads of the sunlight filtered in, bouncing purple through the rippled glass of the neck.

The river stretches twelve miles out to the Gulf of Mexico. The Seminole tribe named it Weeki Wachee. It means “little spring” or “winding river,” depending on which one you’re talking about, Lucinda said. *You know, as a mermaid, you really only have three natural enemies – thunderstorms, the occasional gator that sneaks into the spring, and whatever lingering affection you have for your feet.*

Lucinda explained the contract before handing it to Bronwyn to read over. *Real mermaids don't need to hold their breath for two and a half minutes,* she said. *But girls who were born on land will learn to hold their breath if they think it will bring them back home, where they belong.* Lucinda twirled a silver letter opener as she spoke. *I bet you can do that standing on your head,* she said. *How many minutes can you hold your breath underwater?*

Bronwyn smiled. *Three minutes and six seconds.* Bronwyn listened carefully as Lucinda outlined the last parts of the contract. *A lifetime commitment means that you never go back home. Once the contract is signed, the mermaids of Weeki Wachee are bound to its water just as surely as they were bound to land when they were born girls – So don't take it lightly,* she said. *But the girls who make their way here, from parts far and wide, they've already made the decision long before they ever meet me.*

What happens to us when we get too old to perform? Bronwyn asked. Lucinda leaned back, pressing her fingers together like a steeple. *Mostly, that depends on the girl. You ever heard folk stories, where pirates and conquistadors, men who'd been out to sea so long – they saw manatees, and called them mermaids?* Bronwyn nodded. *Well, they weren't entirely wrong. You don't see many older mermaids because most of them decide to retire as manatees. Arthritis isn't much concern, when you're floating downriver. You know our saying: once a mermaid, always a mermaid.* Lucinda pulled a fountain pen from the top drawer. *I think you're ready to get reborn, don't you?* Bronwyn nodded. *This is going to pinch a little,* Lucinda apologized, taking Bronwyn's hand. She pricked her finger with the letter opener.

Bronwyn considered the pearl of blood, bubbling up from her fingertip like the crystal-clear waters that rose into the spring each day. She looked deep into the sunlit red and saw the desolate stretch of U.S. 19 rolling backwards to Lebanon Junction. To the house where her mother lived, empty and haunted by the ghosts of two men Bronwyn had never met. She saw the skeleton of her father's fishing skip, a silver school of fish darting and tagging through the wreck that no one had ever found. She saw the curve and bend of her own knees and feet, which had always been clumsy and graceless, except when floating in the stillness she found under

bathwater, the chlorinated pool at the YMCA, or the boundless salty water of the Gulf, pulling her further and further from the shore.

For one moment and one moment only, Bronwyn saw all of these things in a teardrop sliding down her mother's cheek, the same size and shape as the teardrop of blood pooled on her fingertip. In that moment, she was suddenly unsure whether she should sign the contract. She thought of the roll of dollar bills her mother pressed into her hand when she saw Bronwyn's suitcase laid out on the bed. *Bronwyn, Momma said, your life is a blank slate – choose wisely.*

Bronwyn looked into the pearl of blood again and saw herself diving, deeper and deeper. For once, not needing to come back up for air again. Every part of the river fed back to the sea, and somewhere below, there had to be a bottom, though no one had yet found it. The caverns twisted deeper and deeper. Bronwyn kept swimming, unfettered by the feet that kept her tethered to the places she had never wanted to be. She let go of her hold on the anchor and surrendered to the current. It swept her toward the labyrinth of tunnels and subterranean caverns, the twisting water beneath the springs of Weeki Wachee.