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opening extract from

The Secret Mermaid: Enchanted Shell

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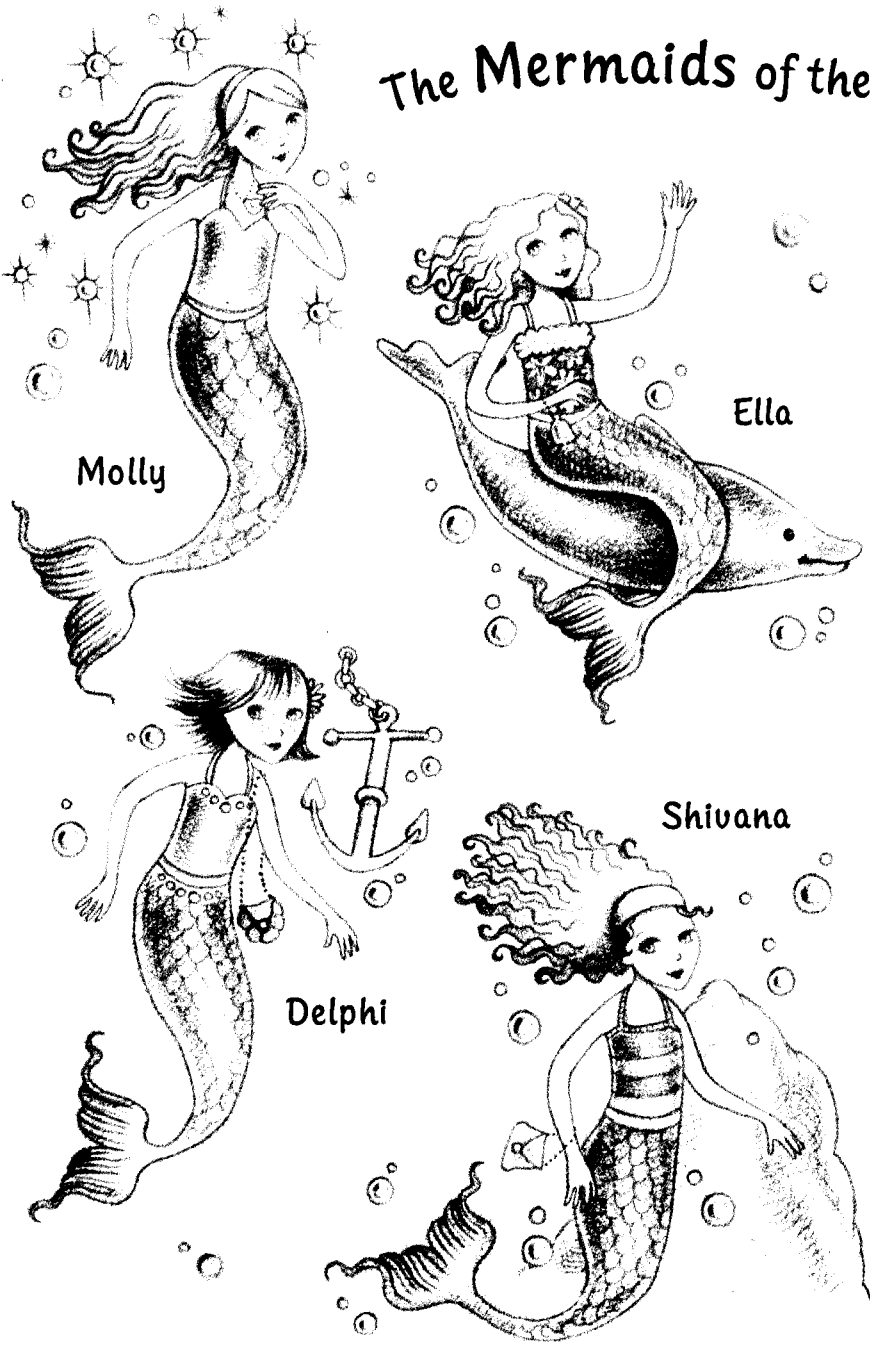
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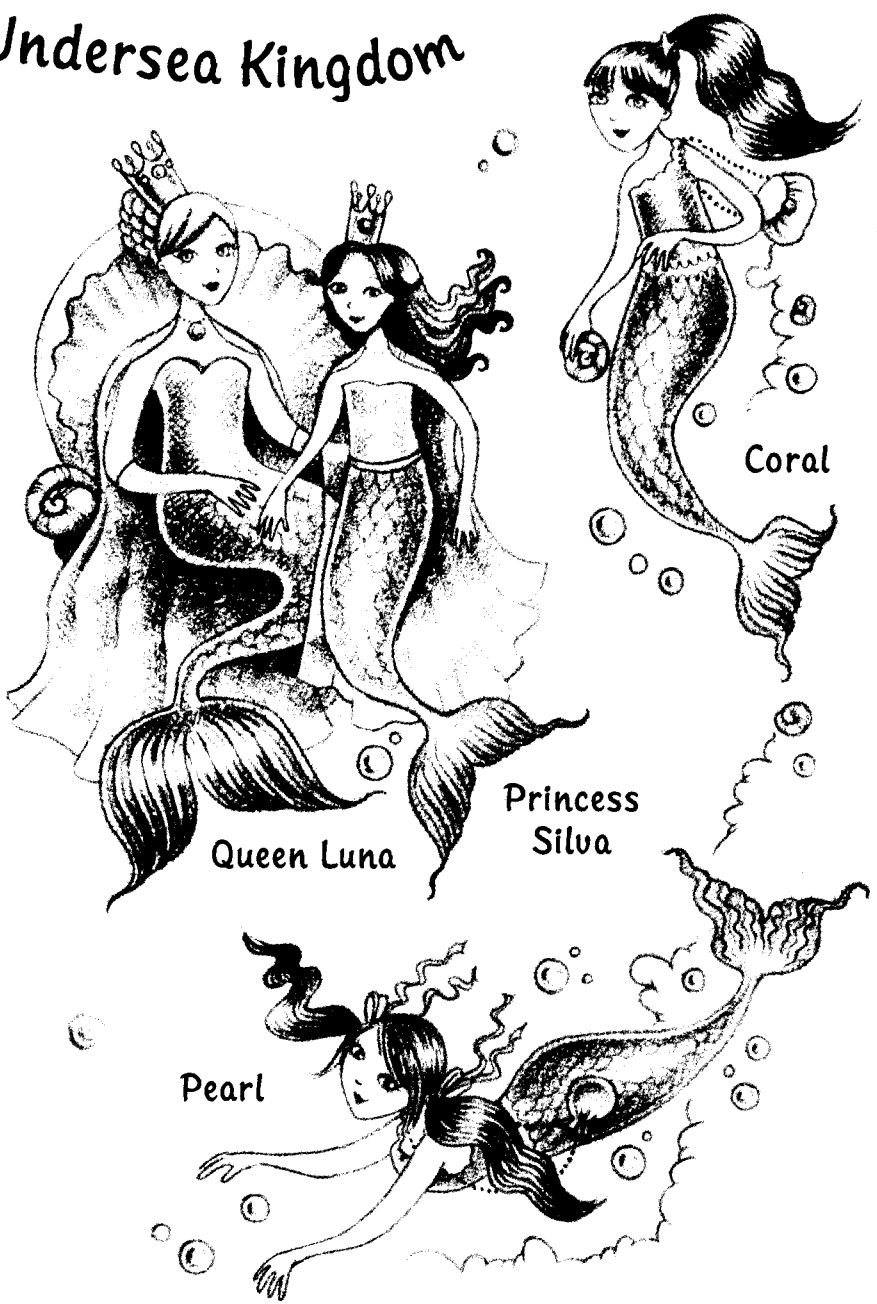
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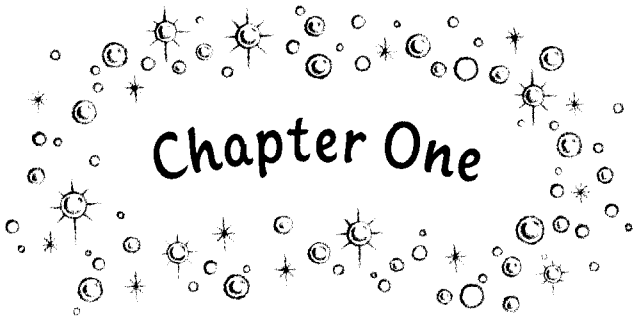
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The Mermaids of the



Undersea Kingdom





Molly Holmes raced across the deserted beach as fast as she could. The sand was cool and damp beneath her bare toes, and the waves were white curls of foam on the shoreline. Seagulls screeched overhead, and Molly laughed out loud. This was her beach now. Her beach!

She slowed to a jog, smiling. It had seemed like a bad dream when her mum and dad had

first told her that they would all be moving house, to live with Molly's gran. Gran had had a bad fall, and Molly's parents had decided they wanted to be with her, now that she was getting older. Molly loved her gran, but still hadn't wanted to move away from her friends and school. "Horseshoe Bay is miles from Katie and my other friends," she'd protested. "I'll never get to see them!"

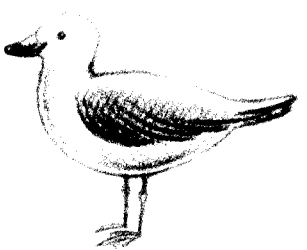


Her mum had hugged her tightly. "We've got the whole summer to settle in, and for you to make friends before school starts,"

she'd said. "And you and Katie can phone each other – and she can come and stay sometimes."

Molly hadn't felt reassured, though. She didn't want to move house, simple as that! There was no way she'd ever make a friend who was even half as much fun as Katie. And she'd hated seeing her cosy little bedroom all bare, with everything packed up in boxes. "Can't Gran come and live with us here?" she'd asked. "She could have the spare room."

Her mum had shaken her head. "It's not as simple as that, Molly," she'd replied. "And besides, your dad and I think it'll be fun to live by the sea. I'm sure you'll love it when you've settled in."



"I'm sure I *won't* love it," Molly had muttered to herself in bed last night. "I know I won't!"

Molly scooped up a handful of sand, and let the wind blow it between her fingers. Now that they were actually here at The Boathouse, she felt differently.

She hadn't been to Gran's house for almost a whole year, after all. She'd forgotten the big garden with its twisty apple trees and a swing that hung from an old oak. She'd forgotten the way the kitchen at The Boathouse always smelled of baking. She'd forgotten how brilliant Gran was at telling stories, too, curled up with Molly in the saggy green armchair. Best of all, she'd been given the attic bedroom to sleep in!

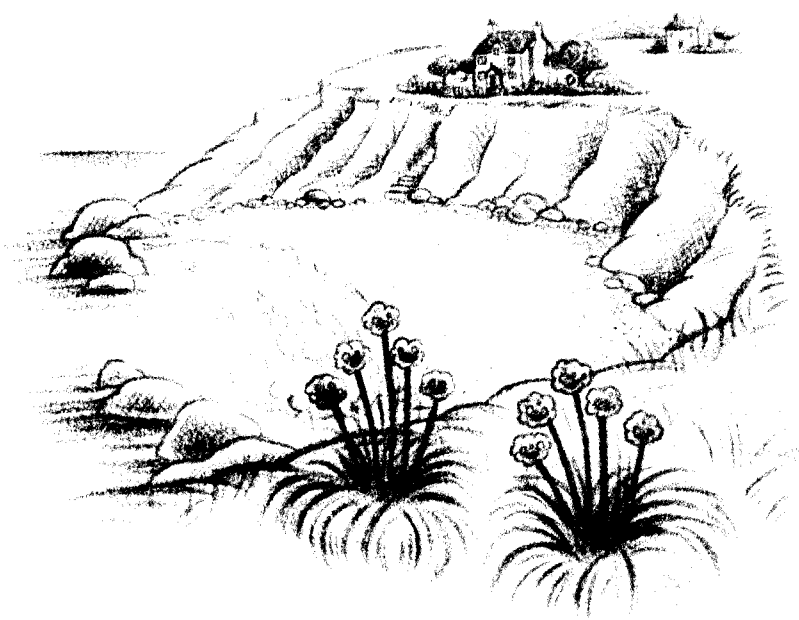


Molly grinned. The bedroom in her old house had looked over their street. It had been noisy in the morning, with people slamming their front doors and driving off to work. But her new bedroom... Well! It was about as perfect as you could get. It was all white, with sloping ceilings and a funny little window that looked out onto the beach.



The house was so near the bay that Molly could hear the waves crashing on the shore and smell the salty air whenever the window was open. And oh, she just loved the beach already!

Molly sat on the sand, hugging her knees to her chest as she gazed around. Horseshoe Bay was a small cove, with huge rocks around its curving sides, and soft, golden sand. It was so pretty!



So maybe – just maybe – living here was going to be all right... As long as she could make a new friend to play with, of course.

"Molly! Let's go in now – it's almost time for tea!"

Molly looked over to where her mum was standing, with Molly's baby brother Toby, at the far end of the cove. Suddenly she felt starving. She jumped up and raced across the sand towards them. "Coming!" she yelled.



Molly's dad had helped Gran set out the tea on the old wooden picnic table in the back garden. There were crusty rolls with butter and crab paste, and a dish of cucumber and cherry tomatoes. It was fun sitting out there, listening to the seagulls shriek and the waves thundering in down below on the beach.

Molly ate two rolls, then a huge slab of cherry cake, and gave a big yawn.

Gran smiled. "That'll be the sea air," she said knowingly.

"I think someone needs an early night," Molly's mum said, sliding an arm around Molly's shoulders and giving her a squeeze. "It's been a long day."

"You'll have sweet dreams up in that attic room," Gran assured her. "That was always my bedroom when I was a girl, you know. And your father slept there too, when he was a boy."

"It's true," Molly's dad said. "And the racket those seagulls used to make every morning – I didn't miss them when I left home, believe me!"

Gran winked at Molly. "Don't listen to him," she said. "You'll get used to the gulls

in no time." She leaned over the table towards Molly, lowering her voice. "You're going to love sleeping there. I just know it."



An hour or so later, Molly sat on the edge of her bed in her pyjamas. She had to keep reminding herself that she lived here now, in Gran's house. Somehow it didn't seem real yet. She couldn't help thinking back to her old room, where she'd slept for so many years until today. It was weird to think about somebody else in there now.

"Sweet dreams," Gran had said, as Molly kissed her goodnight downstairs. "Oh, and Molly?" She put a hand in her apron pocket and pulled something out. "This is for you," she said.

Molly stared down at the necklace that Gran pressed into her hand. The chain was silver, with



a curving piece of shell attached to it. The shell fitted perfectly into her palm, and was smooth and cold against her skin. One side was a creamy white, and the other was mother-of-pearl, gleaming green and pink as Molly turned it. "Thank you," Molly said in surprise. "But..."

"It's a piece of a conch shell," Gran said. "And it's very special."

"What happened to the rest of it?" Molly wanted to know.

Gran pulled her in for a last hug. "It was broken," she said vaguely, kissing the top of Molly's hair. "Now, I'd better help your mum

and dad with that washing-up, I think," she said, before Molly could ask any more questions. "Goodnight."

Up in her room, Molly crossed to the window and gazed out at the sea. The tide had come right into the bay now, and the water was tinged with scarlet streaks where the sun was starting to set.

"All ready for bed?" came her mum's voice just then.

Molly turned to see her parents in the doorway. "Look what Gran gave me," she said, holding up the necklace.

Her dad let out a whistle of surprise. "I remember that piece of shell!" he said. "It was always on our mantelpiece when I was a boy. Fancy her still having it, after all those years! Your gran never let me and your Uncle Harry play with it, Molls. Used to say it was

too special for us boys to mess about with, she did!"

Her mum smiled. "She must trust you, then, Molly," she said, walking over to close the curtains. "Come on, into bed now. Why don't you leave the necklace on the bedside table – and then maybe you'll dream about the sea."

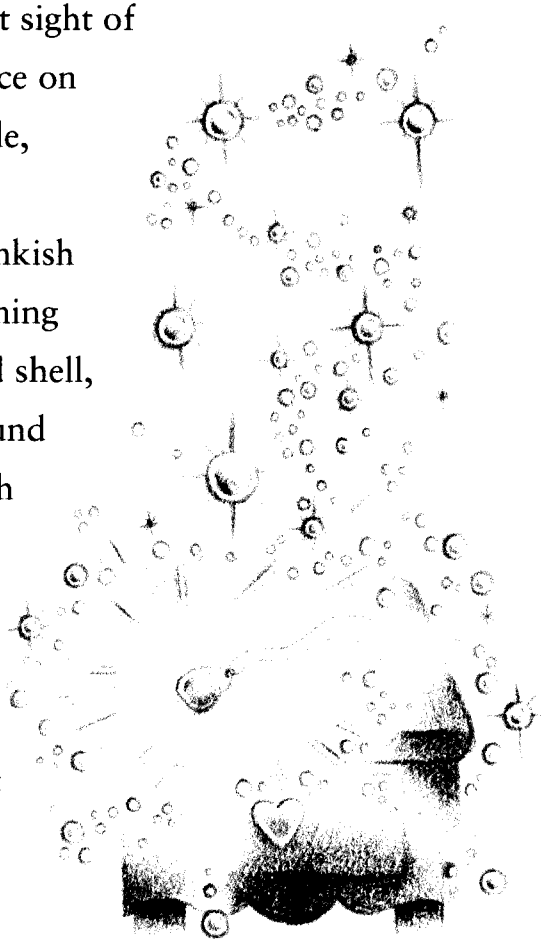
"I hope so," Molly said, pulling back her duvet and sliding her legs underneath. She put the shell necklace next to her bedside lamp. "Night, Mum. Night, Dad," she added, lying back on her pillow.

Her mum and dad kissed her goodnight. "Sleep well," her mum said.

Molly lay awake in the darkness, as her parents pulled the bedroom door shut behind them. There was no way she was ever going to get to sleep tonight, she decided. There was far too much to think about for that!

She tossed and turned for a while, her mind drifting in and out of thoughts. Then, as she rolled over for what seemed like the hundredth time, she caught sight of the shell necklace on her bedside table, and gasped.

A strange pinkish light was streaming from the curved shell, and the air around it was filled with tiny golden sparkles. Molly stared in surprise, then sat upright and rubbed her eyes.



But when she took her hands away, everything was dark again.

Did I just imagine that? she wondered, groping around for the necklace. Her fingers curled around the shell and she picked it up. This time, it felt warm, as if it had been lying in the sun all day.

Molly frowned, trying to make sense of what she'd seen – or what she *thought* she'd just seen. *Was I asleep after all?* she wondered. *Was it just a dream? Because everyone knows that shells don't glow and sparkle like that! Not unless they're...*

She shivered with excitement. *Not unless they're magical!*

