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Opening extract from

Emily Windsnap and the Castle in the Mist

Written by

Liz Kessler

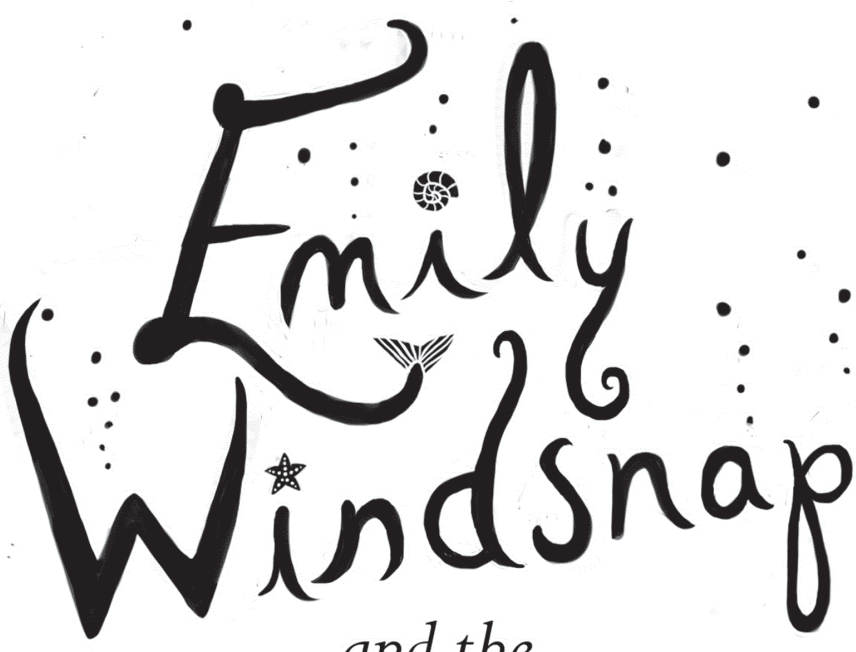
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and the

Castle in the Mist

LIZ KESSLER

Decorations by Natacha Ledwidge

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This book is dedicated to 'the other SAS',
especially Celia Rees and Lee Weatherly,
without whom Emily might still be lost at sea

Also to my sister, Caroline Kessler,
without whom I would have been pretty lost myself





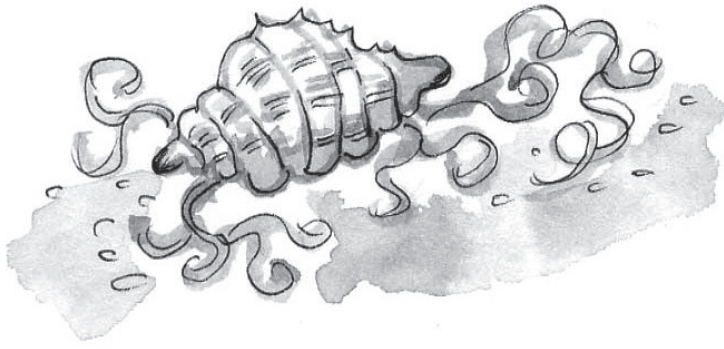


And if our hands should meet
in another dream, we shall build
another tower in the sky.

From 'The Prophet'
by Khalil Gibran



Prologue



It's midnight, and as light as day.

A full moon shines down on the ocean, making the waves dance as they skirt the edges of the tiny island, lapping on to jagged rocks and stony beaches.

A chariot glides through the sea, tracing a circle around the island. Solid gold and adorned with jewels on every side, the chariot is pulled by dolphins, each decorated with a row of diamonds and pearls along its back and head.

Inside the chariot sits the king of all the oceans: Neptune. Grander than ever, a chain of sparkling jewels around his neck, his gold crown glinting above his white hair, his trident by his side, his green eyes shine in the moonlight as he looks across at the island. He is waiting for his bride to

appear from the castle that stands above the rocks, half hidden by mist, its dark windows gleaming in the bright night sky.

'Go around again!' he demands, his voice booming like thunder. His words send ripples bouncing away from the chariot. The dolphins draw another circle around the island.

And then she is there, smiling as she steps towards the water's edge, her eyes meeting his, their gaze so fierce it almost brings the space between them to life. A bridge between their two worlds.

A small flock of starlings approach the water as she does, circling the air above her head like a feathered crown. Twisting her head to smile up at them, she holds out a hand. Instantly, one of the birds breaks off from the circle and flies down towards her open palm. Hovering almost motionless in the air, it drops something from its claw into her palm. A diamond ring. As the woman closes her hand around the ring, the starling rejoins the other birds and they fly away into the night, slinking across the sky like a giant writhing snake.



'I give you this diamond to represent my love, as great as the earth itself, as firm as the ground on

which I stand.' The woman flicks back shiny black hair as she reaches out towards the chariot to place a ring on Neptune's finger.

A twist of the trident and a dolphin swims forwards. As it bows down to Neptune, it reveals a pearl ring, perfectly balanced on its brow. Neptune takes the ring. Holding it out in his palm, he speaks softly. 'And with this pearl, I offer you the sea, my world, as boundless and everlasting as my love for you.' He slides the ring on to her finger. 'This is a most enchanted moment. A full moon at midnight, on the spring equinox. This will not happen for another five hundred years. It is almost as rare as our love.'

She smiles up at him, her white dress wet at the bottom where she stands in the sea by his chariot.

Holding his trident in the air, Neptune continues. 'These rings may only ever be worn by two folk in love – one from the sea, one from land – or by a child of such a pair. As long as they are so worn, no one can remove them.'

'No one can even touch them,' the woman says, smiling.

Neptune laughs. 'No one may even touch them,' he says. Then he holds his other hand up, palm facing the woman. She does the same and their arms form an arch, the rings touching as they clasp hands. A hundred stars crackle in the sky above

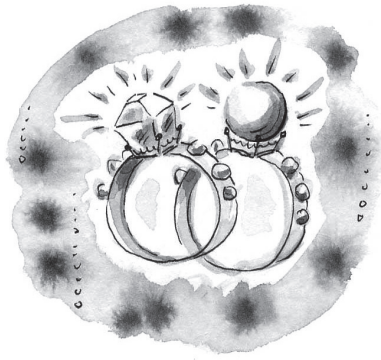
them, bursting into colour like fireworks. 'When the rings touch like this,' Neptune continues, 'they will undo any act born of hatred or anger. Only love shall reign.'

'Only love,' she repeats.

Then he spreads his arms out in front of him. 'At this moment, night and day are equal, and now, so too are earth and sea. For as long as we wear these rings, the symbols of our marriage, there will always be peace and harmony between the two worlds.'

With a final wave of his trident, Neptune holds out a hand to help the woman into the chariot. Hand in hand, they sit close together, her long dress flowing from one side of the chariot, his jewel-encrusted tail lying over the other side.

The dolphins lift the reins and the chariot glides silently off, taking its royal owners away to begin their married life together.



Chapter One



'Emily! I won't tell you again.' I opened an eye to see Mum pulling back the curtain across the porthole in my bedroom. Outside, an oval moon hung low in a navy sky. Fourth quarter, I thought automatically. We'd been learning about the moon's cycle at school. 'It's still night,' I complained as I pulled the quilt over my face and snuggled back into my pillow.

'It's half past seven,' Mum replied, perching on the edge of my bed. She folded the quilt back and kissed my forehead. 'Come on, sweet pea,' she said.

'You'll be late for school.' As she got up, she added under her breath, 'Not that you'd miss much if you were. They haven't exactly taught you anything useful at that place so far.'

She'd left the room before I had a chance to reply.

I let out a heavy sigh as I lay in bed, looking up at the ceiling. Mum seemed to be really down lately. That was the third time she'd grumbled about something in the last week. Personally, I couldn't see what there was to complain about. We were living on a beautiful secret island: Mum, Dad and me, all together on an elegant old wooden ship, half sunk in the golden sand and sparkling water that surrounded the whole island. Merfolk and humans together in peace.

I realise that last bit isn't necessarily a requirement in everyone's ideal living situation, but it comes in handy when your mum's a human, your dad's a merman and you're half and half.



I pulled on my swimming costume and joined Mum at the breakfast table. As with everything else in our home, the table lay on a slant, so I held on to my cereal bowl as I ate.

Dad swam up to the trapdoor next to my seat

and pulled himself up to kiss me on the cheek. 'Morning, my little starfish,' he said with a smile. 'Ready for your Ocean Studies test?'

'Test me!' I said.

Dad scratched his head. 'How big can a Giant Japanese Spider Crab grow?'

'Three metres,' I said instantly.

'Very good. Hm. What colour is a banded butterfly fish?'

'Black and silver. Too easy!'

'Too pointless, more like,' Mum said under her breath. What was *wrong* with her?

Dad turned to her with a frown. 'Not again!' he sighed. 'What is the matter with you? Don't you want our daughter to do well at school?'

'I'm sorry,' she said, reaching down for Dad's hand. 'It's just . . . '

'What? What is it? She's learning lots, she's enjoying herself, getting good grades. I couldn't be more proud.' Dad winked at me as he talked. I smiled back.

Dad and I hadn't got on all that well when we first came to Allpoints Island. I mean, we didn't get on badly; it just wasn't easy. I'd spent most of my life without him and we didn't really know what to talk about, or where to start.

I didn't know he existed at all till recently. It was only a few months ago I'd even found out about myself – that I became a mermaid when I went in

water. It terrified me to begin with. The first time it happened, I didn't know what was going on. It was in a school swimming lesson, of all places. But then I got used to it, and I'd sneak out to swim in the sea at night. That's how I met my best friend, Shona. She's a mermaid too. A proper full-time one. She helped me find my dad. Best day of my life, that was, when I sneaked into Neptune's prison and saw him for the first time.

I guess it all took a bit of getting used to. But the last few weeks had been brilliant, once all the trouble with the kraken was sorted. That's the most horrific, fearsome sea monster in the world, and I accidentally woke it up! Since then, Dad and I had been out swimming together every day, exploring the golden seabed around Allpoints Island; racing against the multi-coloured fish that filled every stretch of sea round here; playing tag in among the coral. Dad was officially the BEST dad in the world.

'That's just it,' Mum was saying. '*You* couldn't be more proud. And you've every right to feel proud. Yes, Emily's coming on leaps and bounds in . . . ' She paused to reach over to the pile of textbooks I'd brought home the previous day. I *loved* all my schoolbooks. They weren't like any schoolbooks I'd ever had before, that's for sure! For one thing, they were all made from the coolest shiny materials, or woven with seaweed and decorated with shells and

pearls. And for another, they were in the swishiest subjects! School had never been such fun.

'. . . in *Seas and Sirens,*' Mum read from the top one. She picked out a couple more books from the pile. 'Or *Sailing and Stargazing*, or *Hair Braiding for Modern Mermaids*. I mean!'

'You mean what?' Dad asked, his voice coming out pinched and tight. 'Why shouldn't she learn about these things? It's her heritage. What exactly don't you like about it, Mary?'

That's when I knew something was really wrong. No one *ever* calls my mum Mary, least of all Dad. Most people call her Mary P. Her middle name's Penelope and Dad's always called her Penny, or his lucky Penny when they're being particularly gooey. Which they hadn't been for a while, now I thought about it. And while I was thinking about it, I guess Mum had a point. I mean, don't get me wrong. I loved all my school subjects. But maybe I did sometimes miss my old school subjects, just a tiny bit. Or just English, perhaps. I used to love writing stories. I even liked spelling tests! That's just because I was good at them.

'What's wrong,' said Mum, 'is that while *you* may be happy for *your* daughter to learn nothing more than how to brush her hair nicely and tell the time by looking at the clouds, *I'd* like *my* daughter to get a proper education.'

'My daughter, your daughter? You make it sound

as if she's two different people,' Dad said. Below the floor I could see the water swishing round as he swirled his tail angrily. It splashed up on to the kitchen floor.

'Yes, well, maybe she is,' Mum snapped, picking up a tea towel and bending down to wipe the floor. Then she glanced up at me and her face softened. 'I mean, of course she's not. She's not two different people at all. It's not Emily's fault.' Mum smiled at me, reaching up to take hold of my hands. I snatched them away, turning my face at the same time so I couldn't see the hurt look in her eyes. That's one thing I absolutely can't stand.

But it wasn't fair. She wasn't being fair. I'd never enjoyed school this much in my life! And OK, so maybe it would be nice to write stories sometimes, but so what if I wasn't learning languages and logarithms or fractions and French? Who said there was any point in those either? Was I ever really going to need to know how much John earns in a week if he gets 4% commission and 3% interest? Surely learning about my surroundings was more important? Knowing which fish were the most dangerous and which were almost friendly. Learning how to look and act like other mermaids, like *proper* mermaids. Even if I did feel a bit silly perching on a rock combing my hair sometimes, at least I was learning how to fit in. Didn't Mum care about those things? Didn't she want me to be happy?

I carried on eating my breakfast.

Mum drew a breath. 'It's just that it's two different worlds,' she said in a quiet voice. 'And I sometimes wonder if they're simply *too* different. I mean, look at my life here. What do I do all day? Sunbathe, comb my hair, maybe go to Synchro Swim a couple of times a week. This isn't a life for me, Jake. I want more than this.'

No one spoke for ages. Mum and Dad stared at each other. I'd just taken a spoonful of cereal and didn't want to chew in case it crunched really loudly, so I sat there with my mouth full of cornflakes and milk, waiting for one of them to say something.

'We'll talk about this later. I need to go out,' Dad said eventually and I swallowed my mouthful. It was too soggy to chew anyway.



Dad left so quickly he didn't even give me a kiss. Not that I was bothered. I mean, I am twelve. I'll be thirteen in a couple of months. It's not as if I need my dad to kiss me goodbye when he goes out!

But. Well, it showed something. Maybe this was all my fault. It was only because of me that they had to try to bring the two worlds together at all.