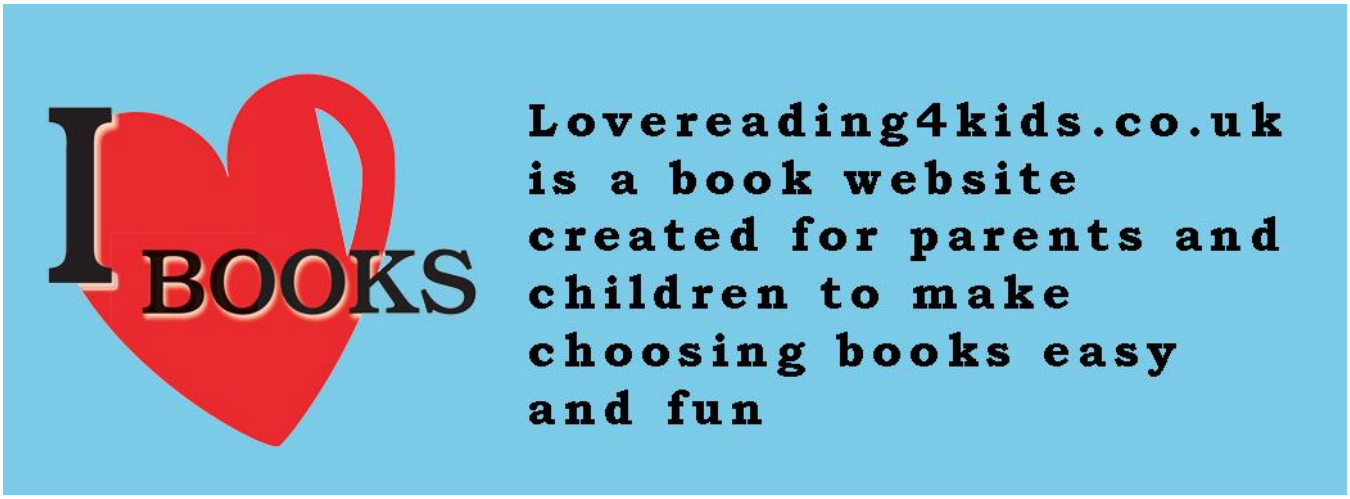


Opening extract from

Bad Mermaids

by

Sibeal Pounder

Illustrated by

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Prologue

Mermaids have been flopping all over this planet for a really long time. And yet no submarine, ship or sinking scientist has ever discovered their whopping world.

Only mermaids know how to get to the Hidden Lagoon. Deep down beneath the waves, just past the NO LEGS BEYOND THIS POINT sign, is a small shell, and inside that shell is a keypad made of old pearly buttons. To open the gates to the Lagoon and all the cities within it, all you have to do is type in the secret code. The code that for thousands of years has kept mermaids hidden from human sight –

The unbreakable!
The UNFAKEABLE!
Ihavenolegs.

1

In a Fish Tank on Land

'May I borrow a pen please?'

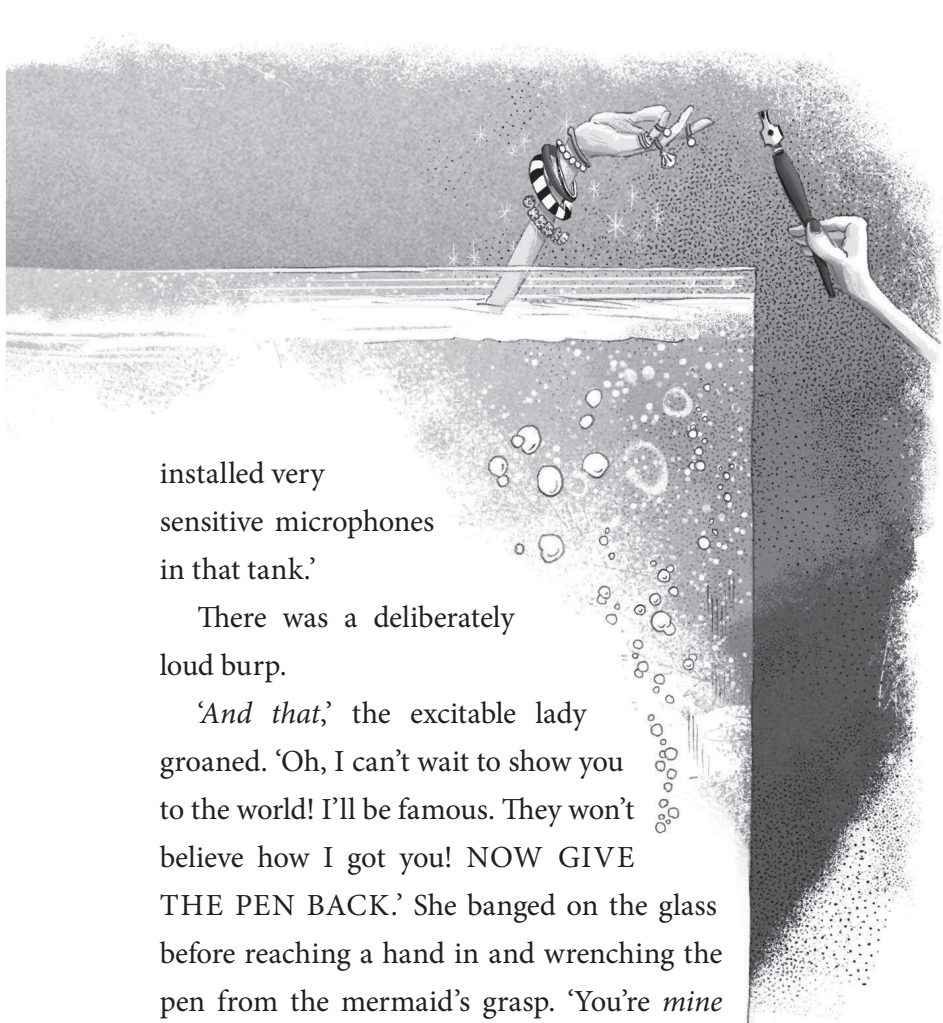
'A pen?' an excitable lady squawked, waving her arms elaborately like someone swatting at least forty flies. She tottered over to the fish tank, her large feet clad in spotted socks and squeezed into a pair of stilettos.

'Yes please, a pen,' came the tired voice from somewhere in the tank's murky water. An elegant hand, fingers adorned with pearl and crystal rings and a wrist stacked with swirly shell bracelets, flopped out of the tank.

'WE'RE COMMUNICATING!' the excitable lady wheezed with joy. She tossed a pen into the tank. 'Me and you. You and me. You and your fin. Me and my socks.'

There was a sigh from inside the tank.

'I heard that!' the excitable lady snapped. 'I've



installed very sensitive microphones in that tank.'

There was a deliberately loud burp.

'*And that*,' the excitable lady groaned. 'Oh, I can't wait to show you to the world! I'll be famous. They won't believe how I got you! NOW GIVE THE PEN BACK.' She banged on the glass before reaching a hand in and wrenching the pen from the mermaid's grasp. 'You're *mine* now, Arabella Cod.'

'No!' Arabella Cod gasped. 'I hadn't finished!'

The excitable lady squealed as she caught a flash of pearly fin. 'What did you write?!'

'Nothing,' Arabella Cod said quickly. 'I … just wanted to hold it.'

The excitable lady twirled around the room, laughing uncontrollably. 'WHAT A DAY!' she roared, punching the air. 'ARABELLA COD, THE MERMAID QUEEN, MY PRISONER FOREVER!' A tiny crab hastily heaved itself out of the tank and scuttled quickly along behind her, carrying a sloppy lump of seaweed.

The excitable lady twirled in its direction.

It froze.

She twirled on her heel once more to face the tank, peering eagerly inside and stroking the glass affectionately. The crab took its chance and scuttled out of the door.

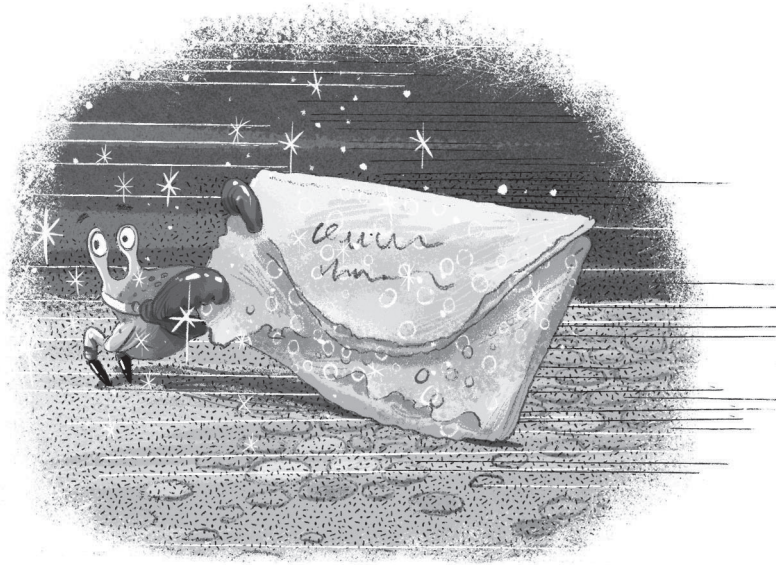
'Don't stop until you get there!' Arabella Cod shouted after it. 'I'm sure they'll figure it out! They have to …'

The excitable lady turned to the door. But the crab was gone.

'Who on *earth* are you shouting at, you strange lump of fish?' she spat.

But Arabella Cod said nothing.

Failing to see that crab would be the biggest mistake the excitable lady ever made.



2

Crabagram!

'CRABAGRAM!' Beattie roared as she slipped her feet into a pair of purple wedges and clattered out of the door, letting it bang loudly behind her. Her friends Zelda and Mimi were sprawled on the sofa, napping. On a night like this! It was just like them to be dribbling and snoring away on *crabagram* night.

She raced along the promenade, the warm Californian breeze whipping about her plaited hair. She took it all in. The jingle of shop doors closing, the smell of hot pavements and plastic pool toys.

'Nice night for a run!' a girl called out from the little lopsided ice-cream stall that sat in front of an old, sprawling factory. Her creamy complexion was decorated with swirls of sunburn. She waved a

clawlike hand, bent from constantly holding ice-cream cones.

Beattie smiled and waved back as she tore along the wooden pier, each faded plank decorated with carvings and doodles – names, insults, a little crab drawing Beattie had carved on her first day there. She leapt and landed in the soft sand, plonked herself down and pulled her skirt over her temporary knees.

It wasn't there. Not yet.



'Well, I tell you, I can't wait to get rid of these cumbersome bananas!' Zelda said, slapping her legs and making Mimi snort. Zelda had got into the habit of using human words like banana to incorrectly describe stuff like legs. 'And I've only had the bananas for two weeks.'

The two of them joined Beattie on the beach, sloppy hotdogs in hand. Although they were twins, they looked nothing alike. Mimi was the shorter of the two, clad in gold sandals and topped with messy hair pulled into two loose plaits.

'Well, hello there, good sir,' she said, nodding at a folded sun lounger.

Beattie and Zelda both stared blankly at her.

'What?' Mimi whispered. 'You don't know what can hear you on land.'

'Usually just the stuff with ears,' Zelda whispered back, taking a big bite of her hotdog and sending a spray of mustard on to her ripped jeans.



Zelda was taller, with short, perfectly groomed hair, flicked for effect, and eyes so packed with mischief her eyelids looked like they were straining to contain it all. Her nails were short, bitten obsessively. Beattie had known them both forever and the three of them did everything together, which was why Beattie had managed to convince them to do a summer on land, with legs.

'Where's the crabagram?' Beattie said, pacing back and forth by the water's edge.

Zelda looked at Mimi, who poured some sand on her hotdog and took a bite.

'That's not what humans put on hotdogs,' said Zelda.

Mimi eagerly dipped her hotdog in the sand and took another bite. 'If I could, I'd tell the humans that sand is the ketchup of the sea! But then they'd know I was a mermaid, so I can't.'

'Wait,' Beattie said, squinting in the darkness. 'There it is!'

Zelda rolled her eyes. 'I've never seen someone so excited to read *Clamzine*.'

Beattie waved a hand dismissively. 'It's our only link to home right now, *Zelda*. And my mum's latest adventure article will be in it!'

A crab scuttled up the beach, wonkily and with urgency, holding a chunk of seaweed carefully like it was cradling a sloppy baby. It placed it gently on Beattie's big toe.

'Thank you, madam,' she said, yanking the loose sheets of seaweed out of the slippery envelope.

CLAMZINE

The number one mermaid news and entertainment zine!

SUNKEN SHIP, AHOY!

Belinda Shelton, the bravest mermaid this lagoon has ever seen, is currently on her biggest adventure yet in the dangerous, human-infested Upper Realms. Read the latest diary entry from our roving travel writer.

'Today I stumbled across a rusty old sunken ship in an area that the humans call the Atlantic, but we know as Upper Realm 4; the rumoured location of the hidden mermaid city of Octopolli. This is the least explored of all our upper realms.

'My morale is high. My face is freezing.

'It is the most magnificent of all the ships. I had a lot of fun playing on its bow, arms outstretched like I was in, I don't know, a famous film. Decaying curtains hang from the windows, tin plates sit stacked in the cupboards.

The local eels are very friendly and the water, while cold, is exceptionally calm.'

TOP THING TO DO IN THE AREA:
Arm-wrestle an eel.*

BELINDA SAYS: A MUST SEE. Or if you prefer: A MUST SEA.

IF YOU LIKED THIS, YOU'LL LOVE: our lagoon's very own ship-wreck, the *Merry Mary.* It was sunk and claimed by the infamous former Mermaid Queen, Mary Ruster, thousands of years ago. Unfortunately, it's probably haunted.

NEXT STOP: Upper Realm 2, the rumoured location of the mermaids of the hidden Crocodile Kingdom.

*Warning: If you lose, you become property of the eel, according to Upper Realm 4 arm-wrestling laws.

Beattie hugged the *Clamzine* tightly. Sometimes she wished she and her mum were back in the Lagoon, but her mum was on one of her epic and unnecessarily dangerous adventures in the Upper Realms (which humans call oceans), and Beattie wasn't due to give up the legs for two more months.

'Wait!' Zelda said, reaching into the soggy seaweed envelope. 'Oh wow, we've got a letter from the big chief herself!' She coughed, preparing to do her best impression of Arabella Cod.

'Don't do the impression,' Mimi said.

'I'm doing it,' Zelda insisted, in a voice so high Beattie winced.

Dear Beattie Shelton and the twins, Mimi and Zelda Swish,
It is me, Arabella Cod, Queen of the Lagoon.
Today marks your final day of life with legs.
I hope this summer has been an informative experience for you and the catering we provided was satisfactory.

As you know, I put this summer initiative in place so every young mermaid would stop complaining that they wanted legs, swimming around singing songs about it and just generally being insufferable. And as you know, very few mermaids have opted to keep the legs and choose instead to return home and embrace their fins.

Many find the experience of legs to be traumatic: there is tripping, the bizarre big toe (why is it so much bigger than the others? We may never know), and you can't out-swim a shark (rest in peace Katie Clearwater, who learned that lesson the hard way).

'Final day? But we've only been here for two weeks!' Beattie cried. 'This letter is months early! How unfair.'

'And that Katie Clearwater story about the shark is definitely made up … isn't it?' Zelda asked.

Neither of them answered, so Zelda slowly read on.

I do hope that this has now categorically confirmed in your minds that fins are the way forward. As my ancestor once said, 'Finfou tabolt magegga onetup,' which roughly translates as 'Obviously fins are better, idiots.'

I assume your families have kept in close contact with you via crabagram, so there is no need to update you in detail on what has been happening in the lagoon. I trust that you will begin your journey home to our glorious capital, Swirlyshell, at midnight without fail. Please see directions below.

Yours leglessly,

A. Cod

Beattie picked up the letter and sniffed it. It smelled strange. She wrinkled her nose. Something was very wrong … She rubbed the instructions with her finger and held it up to inspect it. Pen ink. *That* was what the smell was. Mermaids used squid ink. Beattie gawped at the stinking ink on her fingers.