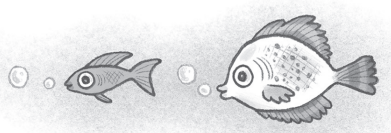


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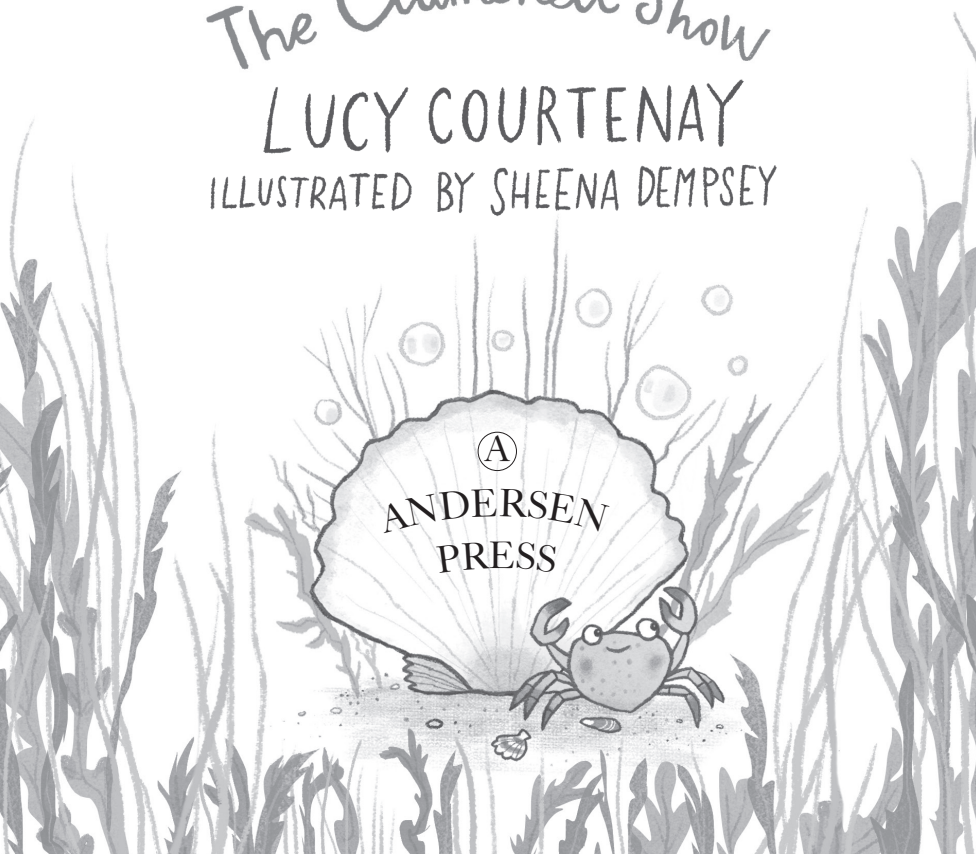


# MERMAID SCHOOL

## The Clamshell Show

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# Chapter One

Marnie Blue and her friends, Orla Finnegan and Pearl Cockle, were waiting beside a large rocky noticeboard outside Lady Sealia's office. Marnie covered a yawn. It was early. Much earlier than they usually came to school. But auditions for the Clamshell Show only happened once a year, and Marnie had been too excited to sleep in.

Marnie's aunt Christabel, Mermaid Lagoon's most famous radio star, had got her first big break at the Clamshell Show. Now it might be Marnie's turn. She couldn't wait. The lights! The music! The famous guests in the audience, the music agents and the record producers! Marnie had been practising her singing exercises for *weeks*.



The only thing missing was the audition information sheet.

'It should be up by now,' whispered Orla. 'They *said* it would go up this morning. Why is it taking so long?'

Marnie checked the large starfish clock that clung to the wall above the headmistress's door for what felt like the hundredth time. It had hardly moved.

'I guess we just have to wait,' she whispered back. 'And we'd better keep our voices down.' Lady Sealia was not someone who liked to be disturbed.

Orla glanced at the small freckled mermaid beside her. 'Why are you here, Pearl?' she asked. 'This audition sheet is for the singing parts.'

Pearl Cockle's singing voice was well-known at Lady Sealia's Mermaid School. And not for any good reasons.



'I'm not here to audition,' said Pearl, flicking her golden tail. 'I just got up early so I could do some fish-spotting. And then I saw you guys and followed you into school.' Her eyes shone. 'I spotted a luminous carnival fish this morning. They only come out at dawn, and they are SUPER rare.'

'Boring,' said Orla.

'You promised never to be mean to Pearl again,' Marnie reminded Orla. 'Not since she helped rescue you from the East Lagoon Rocks—'

Orla blew her dark hair out of her eyes. 'Sorry,' she sighed. 'You're right.' Then she folded her arms and glared at the wall, as if she could change the time with the power of her mind.

'Although I am going to be in the show,' Pearl added. 'I'm playing the rock tuba in the orchestra.'

'Really? Don't you have to audition?' asked Marnie.

'I'm the only rock-tuba player in the school,' Pearl explained. 'So I've definitely got the part.'

Rock-tuba players were rare, Marnie knew that. Rock tubas were rare too. There were only two in the whole of Mermaid Lagoon: one in the school Music Cave, and a huge one in Clamshell Grotto, where the show took place.



'Aunt Christabel says the rock tuba in Clamshell Grotto is so powerful that if you blow the low notes too hard, the whole place falls down,' said Marnie.

Orla's dark eyes widened. 'Seriously?'

'Aunt Christabel is full of stories,' Marnie admitted. 'I never know what to believe.'

'I'll avoid the low buttons anyway,' said Pearl with a giggle. 'Just in case.'

Marnie felt a ripple in the current. More mermaids were arriving. They swam straight up to the noticeboard, pushing Marnie and the others out of the way as they tried to find the sheet for the Clamshell Show auditions. The water churned and swirled.

'Where is it?'

'Where can I put my name?'

'I'm going to audition for the main part!'

'The sheet isn't up yet,' Marnie tried to tell them.

No one was listening. Marnie was jostled around, and pushed into the wall. Pearl and Orla disappeared underneath a pile of multi-coloured tails. Marnie fought her way to the top of the pile, and waved her arms, trying to get everyone's attention.

'The list is not up yet,' she shouted, as loudly as she could. 'IT'S NOT UUUUUUP!'






Suddenly, Lady Sealia's door banged open. Marnie froze at the sight of the tall, silver-haired headmistress. The pushing, shoving mermaids fell silent.

'Who is shouting outside my door?' Lady Sealia demanded. 'You have woken up Dilys.'

Lying in Lady Sealia's arms, Dilys the dogfish blinked sleepily at Marnie. Marnie's heart sank. She knew what was coming.

'Marnie Blue.' Lady Sealia fixed Marnie with her icy stare. 'I have said all along that you are a troublemaker. Just like your aunt.'

Marnie felt her cheeks turning red. Having a famous aunt caused a LOT of problems. Aunt Christabel had been very naughty at school, and a few of Marnie's teachers thought Marnie was the same. But she wasn't. It was very unfair.

'Dilys does NOT appreciate noise at this time in the morning,' Lady Sealia said. 'And neither do I.'

'Yes, Lady Sealia,' said Marnie, squirming. 'Sorry, Lady Sealia. Sorry, Dilys.'

Dilys had already gone back to sleep.

'Make way!' cried a voice. 'Make way please!'

Marnie heard the clank of a heavy coral necklace. The music teacher Miss Tinkle came shooting importantly towards them. Octopuses swim backwards, so Miss Tinkle bounced off the walls a few times before she stopped beside the noticeboard.

'Good morning everyone!' Miss Tinkle gurgled. 'Good morning, Lady Sealia! Good morning, Dilys!'

The music teacher tickled Dilys under the chin with a tentacle. Her other tentacles put the audition sheet on the noticeboard and fixed it in place with several barnacles. Everyone rushed up to the noticeboard again.

Marnie realised that she hadn't brought a pen to add her name to the list. As she opened her mouth to



ask Orla if she could borrow hers, Lady Sealia gave her another hard stare. Marnie suddenly had a horrible feeling that the headmistress was going to punish her. Maybe even stop her from auditioning. She would DIE if she couldn't audition. Why, oh WHY was she related to Christabel Blue?

'Please take it from here, Miss Tinkle,' said Lady Sealia. She stroked Dilys's head with her long pale fingers. 'Dilys needs her beauty sleep.'

'Of course, Lady Sealia!'

The headmistress's study door swung shut.

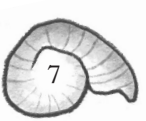
'Come along now!' said Miss Tinkle, clapping her tentacles as Marnie breathed a sigh of relief. 'Sign-up time for singers! The orchestra sign-up is this afternoon,' she added, looking a little anxiously at Pearl.

'I know, Miss Tinkle,' said Pearl. 'Don't worry, I wasn't going to sing.'

'Thank Neptune for that,' muttered Miss Tinkle. 'Well now!' she continued, looking at the rest of the mermaids. 'Who would like a chance to sing in this year's Clamshell Show? There are solo parts, duets and places in the chorus.'

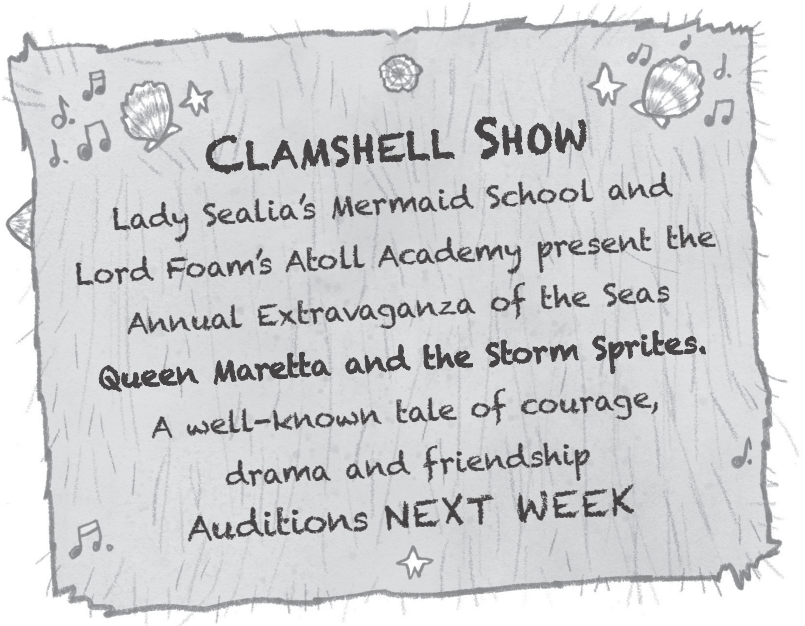
A sea of hands waved brightly coloured shell pens.

'Me, Miss Tinkle!'



'I want to, Miss Tinkle!'

Marnie studied the audition sheet eagerly.




Marnie almost squeaked with joy. *Queen Maretta and the Storm Sprites* was her favourite. The story was exciting and romantic. The songs were amazing and she could sing them all by heart. She knew at once which part she wanted to play.

'I'm going to audition for Queen Maretta,' Orla said, scribbling her name on the sheet. 'What about you, Marnie?'

Marnie felt a little surge of worry. She should have known this would happen.

'I'm going to audition for Queen Maretta too,' she said, a bit nervously.

Orla laughed. 'Come on! Everyone knows Queen Maretta had dark hair.' She pushed back her long inky-black locks and looked meaningfully at Marnie's silver-blonde head.

'Miss Tinkle won't give the part to you just because your hair is dark,' Marnie said, as bravely as she could.

'I know that,' Orla replied. 'Miss Tinkle will give it to me because I'm the best singer in the school.'

Marnie's confidence wobbled. Miss Tinkle liked Orla more than she liked Marnie. Marnie thought it was because Miss Tinkle had taught Aunt Christabel long ago and had never recovered from it. And Marnie did have to admit that Orla had an amazing voice, rich and dark like stormy midnightwaves. Marnie's voice was more like the surface of the lagoon on a summer's day: bright and clear and sparkly. Which was best for Queen Maretta?

Marnie told herself not to give up so easily. 'You're not the best singer in the school,' she told Orla. 'You're just *one* of the best.'



Orla looked disbelieving. 'You're really going to audition for Queen Maretta?'

Marnie clasped her hands so that they didn't shake. She hated arguing, especially with her friends. 'Yes,' she said.

'Well, I guess you can do what you want,' Orla said with a shrug.

Marnie felt awash with relief. 'Great,' she said, and tried to smile. 'Can I borrow your pen so I can put my name down? I forgot mine.'



Orla held out her purple shell pen for Marnie. But as Marnie reached to take it, Orla let go. The pen sank beneath the beating tails of all the mermaids signing up for the auditions, and vanished from sight.

'Sorry,' said Orla.

But she didn't sound sorry at all.

