MERMAID SCHOOL

Ready, Steady, Swim!

LUCY COURTENAY

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First published in 2020 by
Andersen Press Limited
20 Vauxhall Bridge Road
London SW1V 2SA
www.andersenpress.co.uk

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British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data available.

ISBN 9781 78344 9385

Printed and bound in Great Britain
by Clays Ltd, Elcograf S.p.A.

Chapter One

Marnie Blue had never seen such a huge scary merman. His black beard grew to his enormous chest. The blue light of the Sports Cave rippled over his arm tattoos.

'. . . TRAINED TO AQUA-OLYMPIC LEVEL, OF COURSE . . .' he was saying very loudly to Ms Mullet, the crab deputy head of Lady Sealia Foam's Mermaid School, as Marnie and her friends swam into the Sports Cave for their PE lesson.

'Who is THAT?' Marnie said in surprise.

'Well, he's not Miss Haddock,' said Pearl Cockle.

He certainly wasn't Miss Haddock, their usual PE teacher.

Miss Haddock was old and short-sighted and did not approve of tattoos. She had been the fishball champion of Mermaid Lagoon in her youth, but that wasn't saying much. Fishball was the most boring sport Marnie had ever played, with lots of rules and hardly any swimming about. This merman looked like he would eat Miss Haddock for tea.

Ms Mullet looked even smaller than usual next to the giant visitor. 'Good morning, class,' she said. 'I'm sorry to say that Miss Haddock had an accident last night and will not be with us today.'

Dora Agua gasped. 'Is Miss Haddock all right, Ms Mullet?'

'Miss Haddock mistook a reef shark for her pet catfish,' Ms Mullet said. 'She is expected to make a full recovery, but she will be in hospital for a while.'

Most of the mermaids were fond of Miss Haddock, who never made them swim around too fast and sometimes brought her catfish Cecil to lessons.

Others were less concerned.

'I hope Miss Haddock retires after this,' said Gilly Seaflower. 'Her lessons are really boring.'

'That's a terrible thing to say, Gilly,' snapped Orla

Finnegan. 'How would YOU like to be eaten by a shark?'

'If she was EATEN, she'd be dead,' Gilly pointed out as she tied back her long blonde curls with a seaweed hairband. 'I bet she was only nibbled. She's a silly old trout and I won't miss her.'

Marnie frowned. Gilly Seaflower could be really mean sometimes.

'This guy looks like he might actually teach us something, though,' said Lupita Barracuda thoughtfully.

Lupita was a member of the local speed-swimming club, and was always a team captain in Miss Haddock's lessons. She also had the most flexible tail Marnie had ever seen, and could do ten backflips in a row. Marnie could understand her interest in the new teacher. Marnie, on the other hand, was worried. She wasn't very sporty.

Ms Mullet clacked her deep-red pincers for attention.

'This is Mr Marlin,' she said. 'He comes from Lord Foam's Atoll Academy with excellent references. I am happy to leave you in his capable fins.'

She swam away in her usual sideways fashion.

Mr Marlin frowned at the class. 'Hmm,' he said.

'Good morning, Mr Marlin,' said the class cautiously.

There was a pair of bouncy-looking ladies tattooed on the new PE teacher's arms. He flexed his muscles, making the ladies bounce around even more. Miss Haddock would *definitely* not approve of those, Marnie thought.

'TEN LAPS OF THE SPORTS CAVE,' Mr Marlin suddenly screamed, making Marnie jump. 'GET THOSE FLABBY FINS MOVIIIIIIING!'

Half the class shot forward in a blur of brightly coloured tails. The rest followed more slowly. Marnie kept beside Orla and Pearl somewhere in the middle of the pack. Lupita's gleaming black tail was streaking ahead of everyone else. Gilly wasn't far behind.

'MY GRANDMOTHER CAN SWIM FASTER THAN YOU LOT!' Mr Marlin shrieked. 'AND SHE'S A HUNDRED AND THREE!'

Pearl was smaller than the rest of the class, and now her little tail was struggling to keep up. Marnie and Orla slowed down to keep her company.

'NO SLACKING AT THE BACK!' screeched Mr Marlin.

Soon, Marnie had a pain in her side. Pearl's glasses were misting up with the effort. Orla's pale face was almost as purple as her tail. Lupita overtook them on the next lap, shooting a cheeky grin over her shoulder.

'Move your tails, sea snails!' whooped Gilly rudely, following close behind Lupita.

Round and round they went. Marnie lost count of the number of times they swam past the old fishball nets. She just wanted it to end.

Finally, it did. Lupita won, of course. Marnie and her friends collapsed to the floor of the Sports Cave, groaning.

'You!' said Mr Marlin, pointing at Lupita. 'Very good.'

Marnie clapped. So did a few others. Lupita was really popular.

'You!' Mr Marlin pointed at Gilly, who had come second. 'Useless.'

There were giggles this time. Gilly turned bright red with humiliation.

'If you're not first, you lose,' said Mr Marlin. 'It's the WINNING that counts.'

'I *nearly* won, Mr Marlin!' Gilly's lip wobbled. 'I was only half a tail behind Lupita. I—'

'Make like a sardine and *can it*,' said Mr Marlin. 'I want WINNERS in my class.' He glared at everyone else who lay sprawled and wheezing on the rocky floor. 'FIVE MORE LAPS FOR EVERYONE APART FROM TODAY'S WINNER.'

The class groaned.

'Can I do five more laps anyway, sir?' asked Lupita.

'Excellent attitude,' said Mr Marlin. The ladies on his arms bounced approvingly. 'The rest of you could learn a thing or two from this pupil. Off you go. What are you waiting for?'

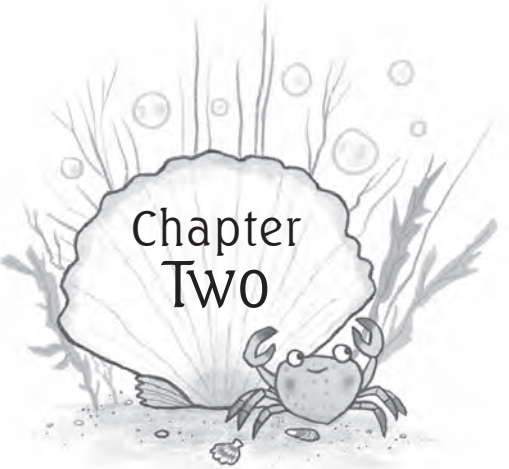
'Isn't torture against the law?' Orla grumbled as the class swam around the Sports Cave all over again.

'My tail is going to fall off,' groaned Pearl.

Marnie's own tail felt like it was stuffed with rocks. She held out her hand. 'We'll do it together,' she suggested.

Pearl took Marnie's hand gratefully. 'Thanks, Marnie.'

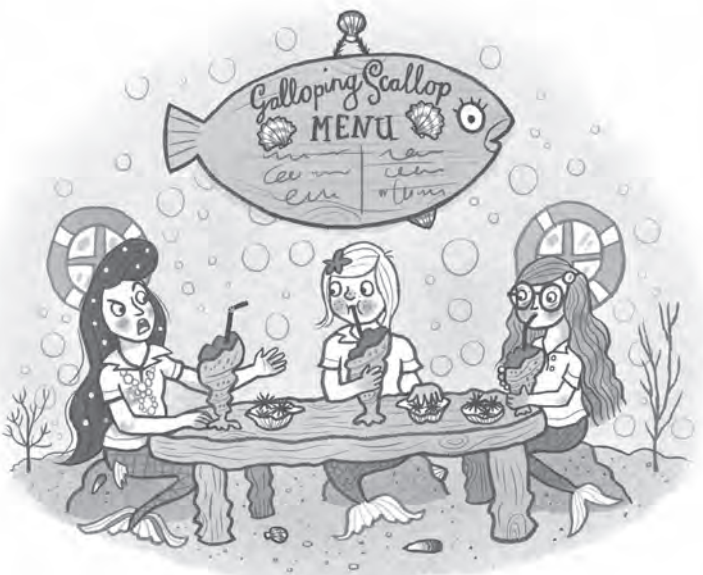
'FASTER!' Mr Marlin screeched. 'YOU'RE SLACKER THAN MY GRANDMOTHER'S FISHING LINE AND IT'S EVEN OLDER THAN SHE IS!'



Chapter Two

'I'm going to complain to Lady Sealia,' said Orla as they sat in the Galloping Scallop café that afternoon, slurping sea-foam smoothies and trying not to think about how much they ached all over. 'Mermaids aren't meant to swim that fast. We're meant to sit around and brush our hair and sing.'

'And become marine biologists like my mum,' said Pearl. 'And hydro-engineers. And—'



‘Well, obviously all those things too,’ said Orla. ‘But when was the last time you saw a marine biologist racing about like there’s pins in her fins?’

Marnie put down her salted sea-urchin cookie. ‘It’s about fitness, I guess,’ she said. ‘If you’re fit, you can do your job better. If you’re fit, you can sing for longer because your lungs are super-healthy.’

Orla grunted and took another slurp of her smoothie. ‘Well, I think it’s stupid.’

Marnie glanced over to where Lupita was sitting with Dora. Lupita’s cheeks were flushed and her eyes sparkled as she laughed at something Dora was saying. Across the café, Gilly was deep in conversation with Mabel. She had been very quiet after PE, which had made a nice change.

‘So what do you think of this place?’ Pearl said, jolting Marnie out of her thoughts.

‘The cookies are good,’ Marnie said. ‘Did your dad make them?’

‘He made everything on the menu,’ said Pearl proudly.

Pearl’s dad had just opened the café to go alongside his fish-farming business. The fish was the freshest in Mermaid Lagoon, and the cookie flavours were surprising and delicious. Judging from how busy the tables were, the Galloping Scallop was going to be a swim-away success.

Half of Lady Sealia's was here, chatting and joking over sea-foam smoothies and cookies. Several merboys from Atoll Academy were in a large, brightly-coloured coral booth at the back of the café. Marnie recognised Eddy and Algie, who had performed with them in the recent Clamshell Show. The booth had been empty when Marnie and her friends arrived, but Pearl was allergic to coral and so they had chosen a table by the window.

Orla glanced across the café at the merboys. 'Didn't Ms Mullet say Mr Marlin came from Atoll Academy?'

When Marnie nodded, Orla leaned back in her seat. 'Hey, Eddy,' she shouted across the café to a merboy with brown hair and a cheeky smile. 'What's Mr Marlin like?'

Gilly and Mabel started giggling and tossing their hair around. Marnie rolled her eyes. Some of the mermaids were idiotic about the merboys of Atoll Academy.

'Snarlin' Marlin?' said Eddy. 'He's a nightmare. He made Lord Foam *cry* once.'

Marnie couldn't imagine anyone making the big, red-bearded head of Atoll Academy cry. Lord Foam was Lady Sealia's husband, and almost as big as Mr Marlin.

'He's our new PE teacher,' said Orla, rather glumly.

Eddy looked sympathetic. 'Try not to come last in anything,' he said.

Gilly gave a squeal of silly laughter, flicked her hair and fell off her café chair.

'You're very quiet tonight, Marnie,' said Marnie's mum Daphne. 'Is everything all right?'

Marnie's aunt Christabel put down her sparkly nail polish and leaned her elbows on the table. 'Leave the girl alone, Daffy,' she said. 'She's probably thinking about a *merboy*.'