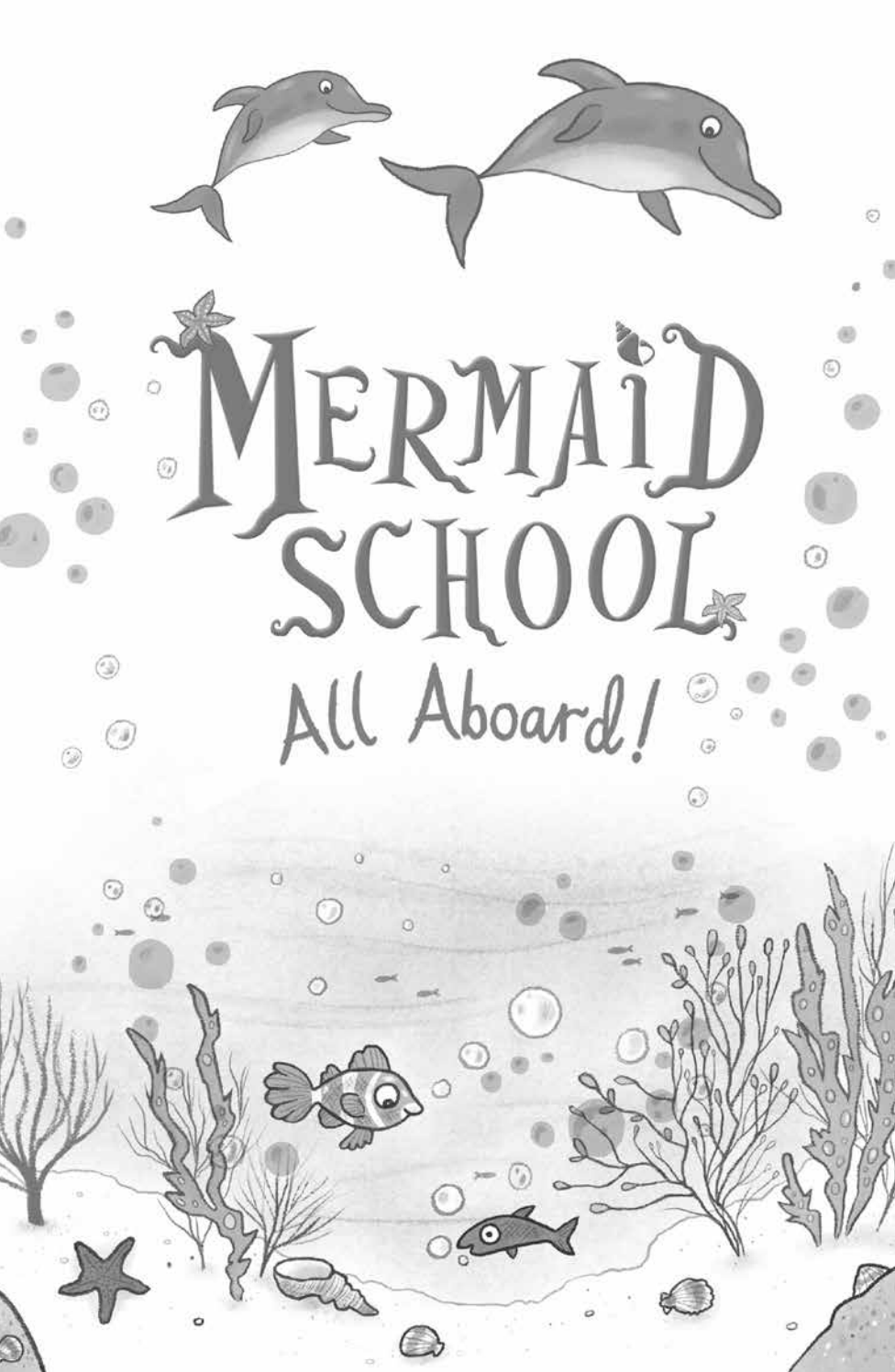

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The Mermaid School series

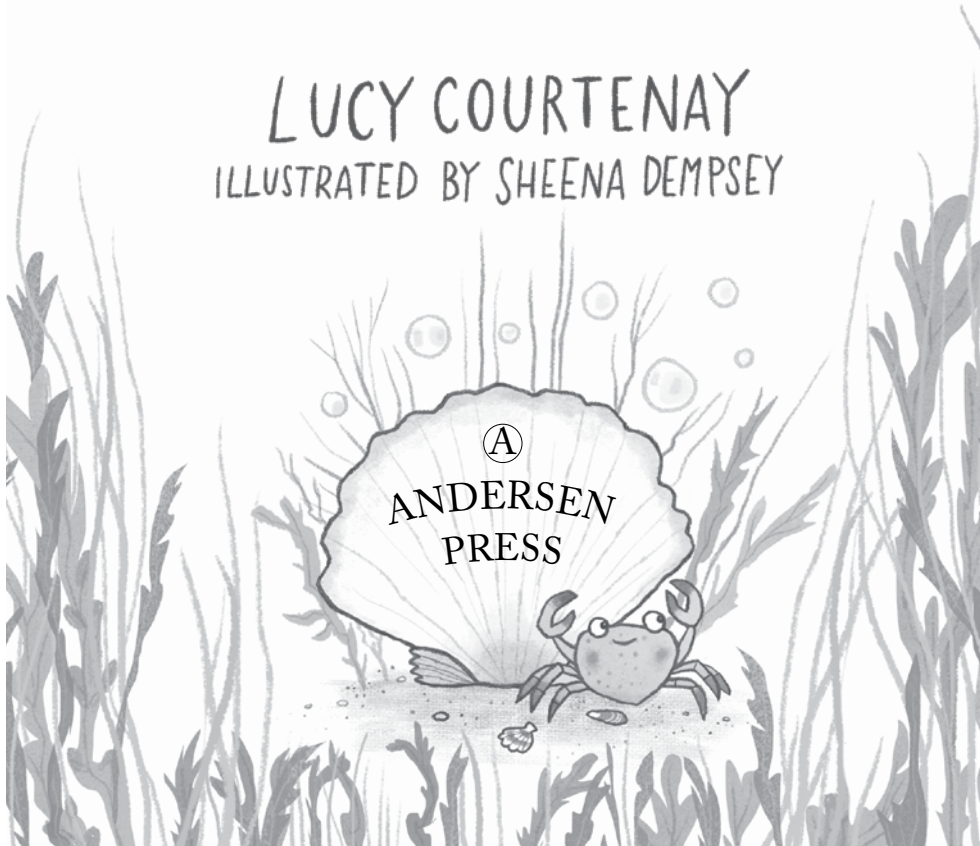
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All Aboard!

LUCY COURTENAY
ILLUSTRATED BY SHEENA DEMPSEY



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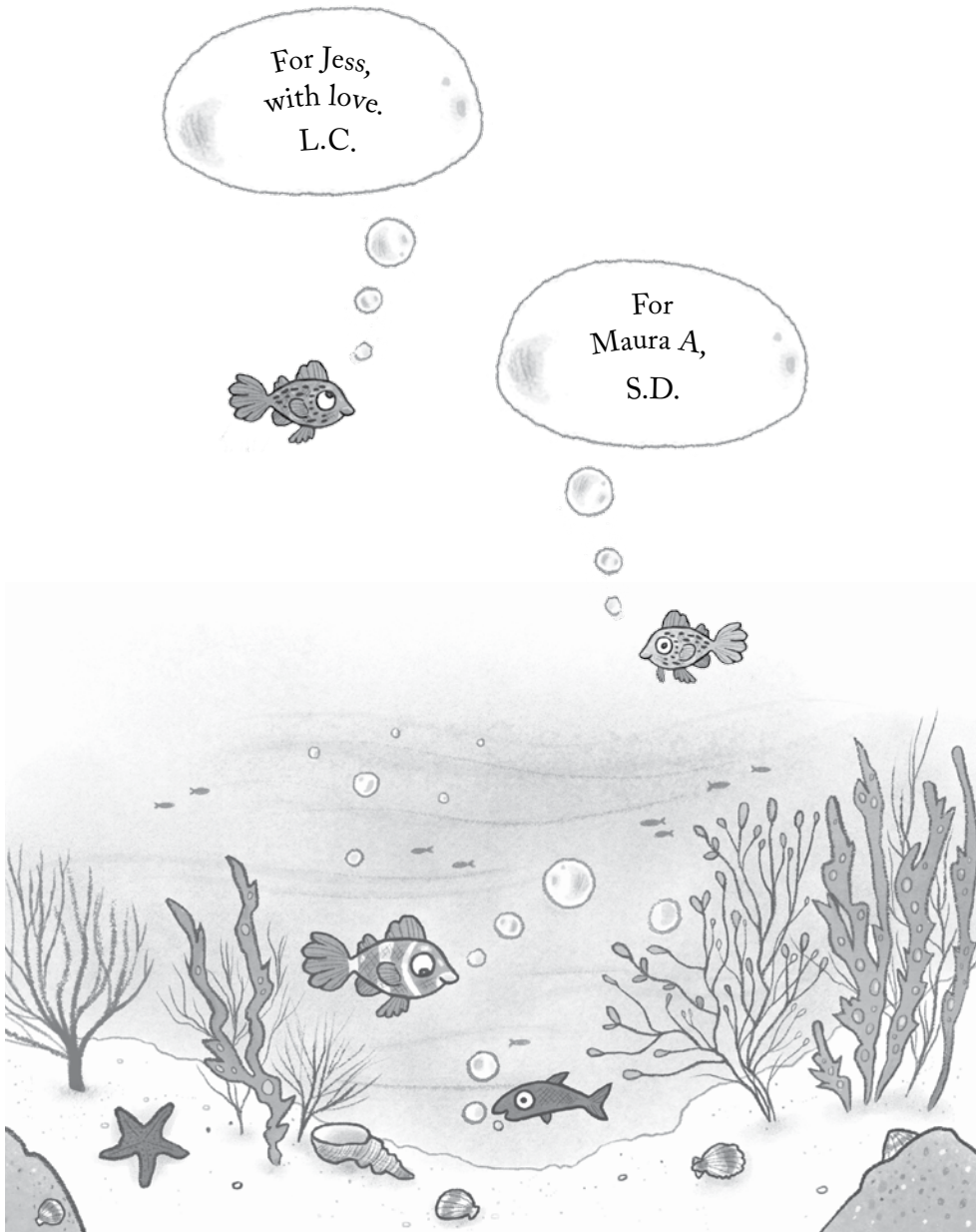
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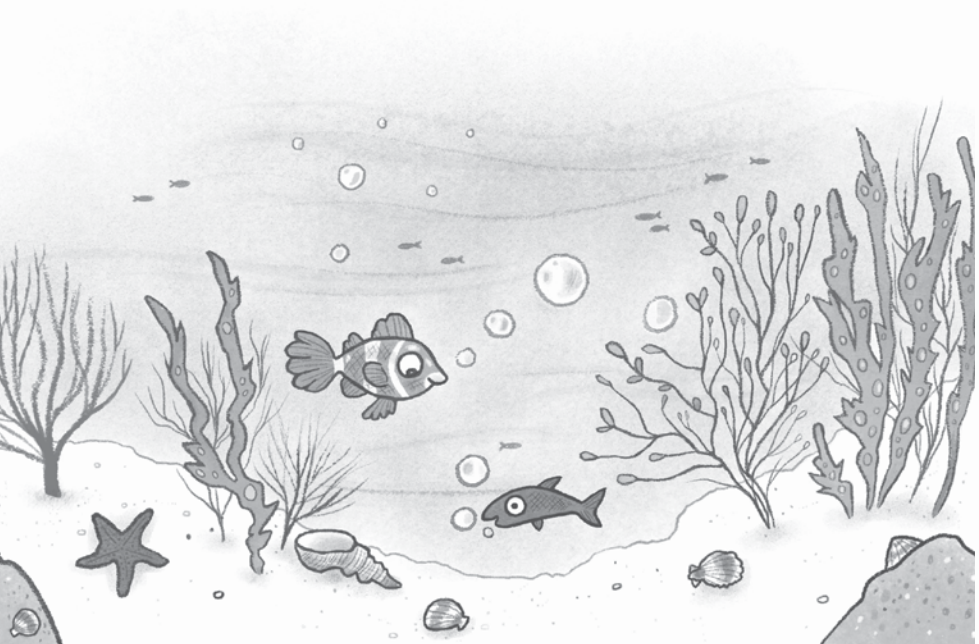
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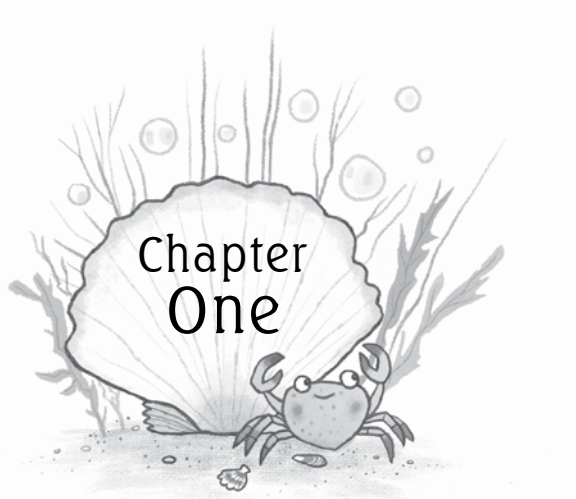
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Pearl's House
Galloping Scallop Cafe
Mermaid Lagoon
(Not to scale)
Lord Foam's Atoll Academy
To Queen Maretta's Palace
School Rock
Coral Ridge
East Lagoon Rocks
Clamshell Grotto
Radio Seawave
Marnie's House
Orla's House
N
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Chapter One

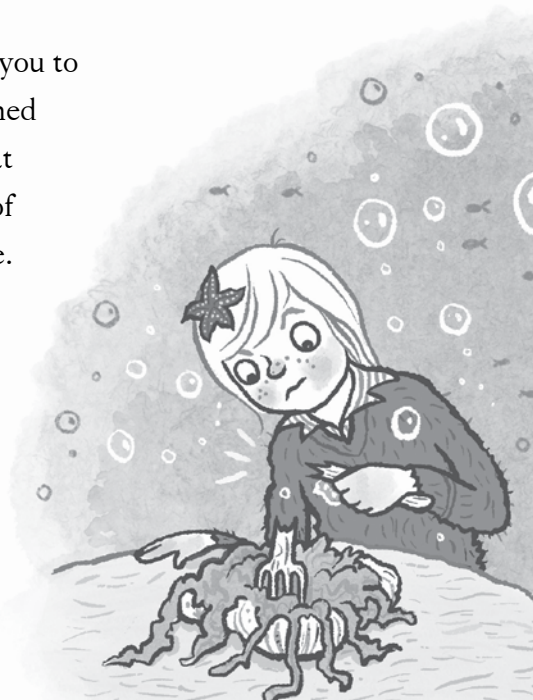
Marnie Blue stared at her plate.

'Mum?' she said cautiously. 'What *is* it?'

Daphne Blue wiped a blob of green gravy off the end of her nose. 'Algae curry,' she said. 'It's *full* of vitamins.'

Marnie prodded the dark green stew with her driftwood fork. The fork snapped in half. 'It's full of sand too,' she said.

'The sand will help you to digest the curry,' explained Daphne. She sat down at the table in the middle of their little mermaid cave. 'I was reading all about it in the recipe section of *Fishtales Monthly*. We should all have more sand in our diets.'



Marnie put down her broken fork. 'I think I'll wait for Aunt Christabel,' she said. 'Where is she anyway?'

'I have no idea,' Daphne admitted. 'You know what your aunt is like with her galas and fashion launches and music awards. She'll turn up. Eat up before it goes cold!'



'It's already cold,' Marnie pointed out, a little gloomily.

'Well, eat up anyway,' said Daphne. 'We have a big day tomorrow and we are going to need all the energy we can get!'

Marnie cheered up a bit. The first years at Lady Sealia Foam's Mermaid School were going on a school trip to Queen Maretta's Palace. Her mum had filled in all the forms, and paid for Marnie's ticket. She had even volunteered to come along and help. Marnie was looking forward to it more than anything. She hoped she'd be in a group with her two best friends, Pearl Cockle and Orla Finnegan.



She looked out of the window at Mermaid Lagoon. There was no sign of Christabel's blue sea-moss coat, or her aunt's cheeky little goldfish Garbo on her crystal-studded lead. It was very unlike her glamorous radio-star aunt to be late for dinner. Maybe Christabel was visiting her human boyfriend, Arthur.

Christabel was in a LOT of trouble about Arthur. Humans weren't allowed in Mermaid Lagoon. But what could you do, Marnie wondered, when it was true love? Christabel kept some sparkly crystal tears in a bowl, and *everyone* knew you only cried crystal tears when it was true love.

Marnie thought about the wish she had recently made for her aunt's happiness. Queen Maretta herself had magically appeared and granted the wish. Perhaps right now, Christabel and Arthur were secretly getting married!

'Horace?' said Daphne, waking Marnie from her daydream. 'Light.'



The large angler fish above the kitchen table switched on his light. The rocky cave filled with a cosy gleam.

'So!' said Daphne. 'Queen Maretta's Palace! I went there on a school trip when I was your age too. It is the most beautiful building in the whole lagoon.' She took a large scoop of algae curry and put it in her mouth. She chewed and swallowed, screwing up her face. 'Yum,' she said, a little fiercely.

The palace was a long way away. Marnie hoped she wouldn't be sick on the journey. She certainly *would* be sick if she ate her dinner.

'I want to see the Jewel Room, with the famous Ocean Orb of Truth,' she said aloud as she pushed her curry around her plate. 'Queen Maretta used it to see the truth about the war with the storm sprites – that storms were good for the lagoon's ecology – and saved the merfolk from any more battles! Though I'm not sure I'd be brave enough to look in the Orb. Apparently it shows you the truth about every naughty thing you've ever done as well. Can I please take some sand dollars for the giftshop?'

The door to the cave burst open. Christabel Blue, star of the *Big Blue Show* and the most famous mermaid in Mermaid Lagoon, swam inside.

'Sorry I'm late,' Christabel said. Horace's light reflected off her huge crystal necklace and bounced little swirls of brightness off the rocky walls. 'The traffic was terrible. Have you ever tried swimming through a school of tunafish?' She frowned and sniffed. 'What *is* that terrible smell?'



She took off her sea-moss coat and hung it on a barnacle hook by the door. Then she unclipped Garbo's lead. Garbo shot into a corner and did a big wee. Marnie giggled.

'I wish you would train that naughty little fish to do her business outside, Chrissie,' said Daphne. 'We're having dinner.'

'You didn't answer my question,' said Christabel.

She gave Marnie a big lipsticky kiss on the top of her head. 'It smells like King Neptune's armpits in here.'

'It's algae and sand curry,' Marnie explained.

'*Pooh!*' said Christabel. 'Let's send out for a takeaway. I know a charming octopus who does marvellous things with seaweed noodles. I'll send him a scallop right away.'

She dug around in her pearl-studded handbag and pulled out a dainty little scallop. Tucking a note into the scallop's beautiful fan-shaped shell, Christabel opened the door again and sent the scallop on its way.



Daphne defiantly ate more of the green sludge. 'It's delicious,' she said. 'And extremely good for you.'

As her aunt settled down at the table, Marnie thought she looked a bit distracted. She darted little glances at Christabel over her broken driftwood fork.

'Where have you been, Aunt Christabel?' she asked at last, as Daphne scraped up the last fronds of algae from her plate.

'Here and there,' said Christabel vaguely. 'What are you up to tomorrow, darlings?'

'We're going to Queen Maretta's Palace,' Marnie explained. 'Everyone says it's got an *amazing* giftshop.'

'But we're not going for the giftshop,' said Daphne. She took another brave bite of curry. 'We're going for the history! The architecture! The experience!'

'Do you remember our school trip there, Daffy?' Christabel asked. 'We had a lot of fun in the air fountain. If you put your mouth on an air jet,' she told Marnie, 'you can do the most amazing burps.'

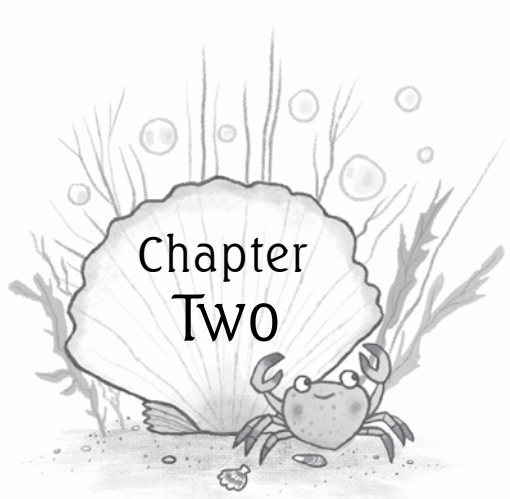
Daphne sighed. 'Honestly Christabel, you are *terrible*.'

'What can I say?' said Christabel. She gave a faint smile. 'I live life to the full.'

'Why don't you come as well, Aunt Christabel?' Marnie asked.

Christabel waved a hand. Her rings glittered in Horace's light. 'School trips aren't really my thing, darling,' she said. 'Ah, here is the octopus with our noodles already. Didn't I tell you he was *marvellous*?'



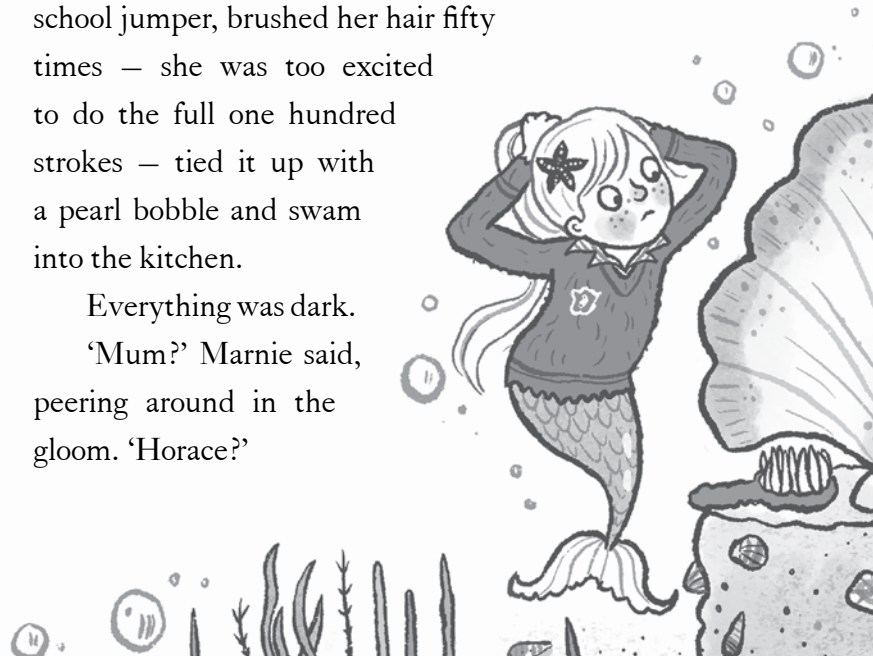


Chapter Two

Marnie woke up with a flip-flopping feeling of excitement, as if there was a fish in her tummy trying to get out. Today was the day she would see Queen Maretta's Palace with its gleaming crystal windows and famous coral gardens and brilliant giftshop! She hurried to the bathroom to wash her face and scrub her tail with a sea sponge until it gleamed. Then she put on her school jumper, brushed her hair fifty times – she was too excited to do the full one hundred strokes – tied it up with a pearl bobble and swam into the kitchen.

Everything was dark.

'Mum?' Marnie said, peering around in the gloom. 'Horace?'



Horace floated sleepily out of his hole in the ceiling and switched on his light. Marnie gazed at the empty breakfast table.

'Mum!' she shouted. 'We're going to be late!'

A terrible groaning sound came from Daphne's bedroom. Marnie swam down the corridor. Horace followed with his swinging light.

'Is everything all right?' Marnie asked, putting her head around her mum's door.

Daphne was lying in bed. Her face was the same colour as last night's curry. 'Not . . . feeling well,' she croaked.

Panic gripped Marnie. 'But we've got the school trip,' she said.

Daphne groaned again. There was a nasty farty sound, followed by an ill sort of smell. A cluster of greenish bubbles rose to the rocky ceiling of the cave. 'I'm sorry, darling,' she gasped. 'But I really don't think . . . Urgh . . .'

Christabel appeared at Daphne's bedroom door, yawning and patting her hair.

'Aunt Christabel, what's the matter with Mum?' said Marnie.

'Algae and sand curry,' said Christabel, wrinkling her nose. 'Daffy, you poor thing. I always said that health food was bad for you.'

'I feel dreadful,' said Daphne.

'You smell dreadful too,' said Christabel. 'Let's open a window. A few squirts of perfume wouldn't go amiss either.'



Marnie felt anxious. 'But . . . what about my trip?' she said.

Daphne propped herself up in bed. Her eyes were bloodshot and bleary. 'I'm so sorry, Marnie,' she said. 'But I can't possibly come.'

'*You* didn't eat the stuff, darling,' Christabel said, putting a comforting arm around Marnie's shoulders. 'You can still go to the palace.'

Tears sprang to Marnie's eyes. 'But it was going to be really fun with Mum,' she said. 'And we were . . . we were going to go together . . . '

'There, there,' said Christabel as Marnie burst into tears. 'Perhaps I could come instead? I know I'm not your mother, but I can be quite fun sometimes. And I find myself . . . a little freer these days.'



Marnie wiped her eyes. 'But you said school trips weren't your thing.'

'But my niece very much IS my thing,' said Christabel. 'And we can't have you in tears. Crying blotches the skin.'

Marnie felt better. She threw her arms around her aunt's tummy. 'Thank you!' she said. 'But are you sure you won't be missing something important? You have your radio show and all your work.'

Daphne farted again, extremely loudly. Horace backed out of the room.

'What can be more important than escaping this terrible pong?' said Christabel. 'I'll send a scallop to the studio and postpone today's recording. Daffy darling, will you be OK by yourself?'

Daphne waved a hand weakly. 'I'll be fine,' she said. 'Take some sand dollars from the clam in the kitchen for the giftshop, Marnie. Don't forget to appreciate the architecture . . . urgh . . . '

Christabel gently shut Daphne's door. 'I'd better get ready then, hadn't I?' she said.

Marnie glanced at the starfish clock in the kitchen. 'We're supposed to be at school at quarter past the morning starfish,' she said. 'It's already quarter to.'



Christabel swam back to her bedroom. 'Plenty of time,' she said. 'Go and have some breakfast. I'll be out in a tick.'

Marnie helped herself to a bowl of Coral Crunch. She brushed her teeth. She took her packed lunch out of the cold-cave box – three seaweed wraps, a bottle of algae juice and a packet of sea-cucumber slices – and slid it into her lunchbox. She tickled the kitchen clam so it opened its shell and let her take out two sand dollars. She carried a warm drink to her mum and kissed her goodbye. Then she sat down on a stool and waited for her aunt.

As the starfish clock arms moved to the top, Christabel swam out of her room. She looked exactly the same as when she had swum INTO her room.

'Aren't you dressed yet?' Marnie said.

'I have everything under control,' said Christabel. 'Have you seen my sea-mud face cream?'

'But Aunt Christabel . . .' Marnie began.

Christabel swam into the bathroom and shut the door. Marnie tidied the kitchen to take her mind off the time. Perhaps she ought to go without her aunt. It really was getting very late. Lady Sealia was very funny about punctuality.



Christabel sailed out of the bathroom as the starfish clock arms edged towards five past. Her hair and make-up were perfect, but she was still in her sea-moss dressing gown. 'Just one or two more things,' she said.

'Like clothes?' said Marnie.

Christabel wagged her finger. 'I just need a teensy bit more time to find my favourite sea-silk jacket.'

'They're going to leave without us!' Marnie shouted as Christabel vanished back into her bedroom.

'It's so important to present a stylish face to my fans,' Christabel shouted back. 'I can't go out looking anything but my best.'

At ten past the starfish, Christabel drifted back into the hall, patted her hair in the hallway crystal mirror, attached an enormous pair of coral earrings, clipped Garbo on to her lead, scooped up her pearl-studded handbag and struck a pose.

'How do I look?' she said.

'You look VERY LATE INDEED,' Marnie said crossly.

'I'll just send a quick scallop to the radio station,' said Christabel, hunting through her bag.

'Can you do that on the way?' Marnie pleaded.

The lagoon was busy with early-morning traffic. A shoal of groupers were causing a bottleneck, and the water was thick with impatient tails. Messenger scallops flashed through the glittering water. Marnie dodged through the crowds, dragging Christabel with her.

'It's Christabel Blue!' squealed a dark-haired merman with three tigerfish on matching leads. 'Christabel, I *adore* you. Can I have your autograph?'

'Well of course . . .' Christabel began.

