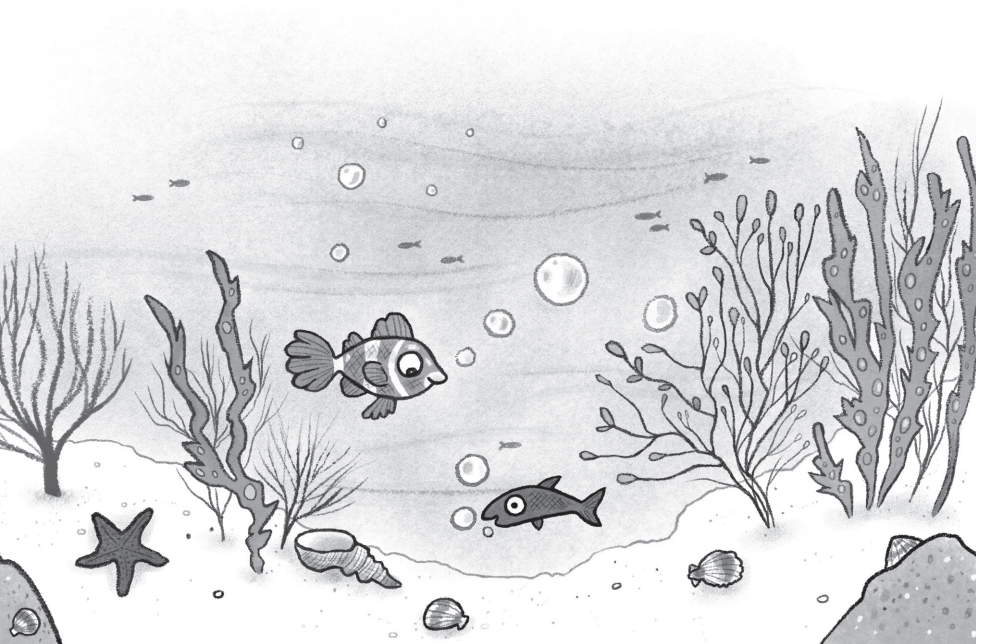
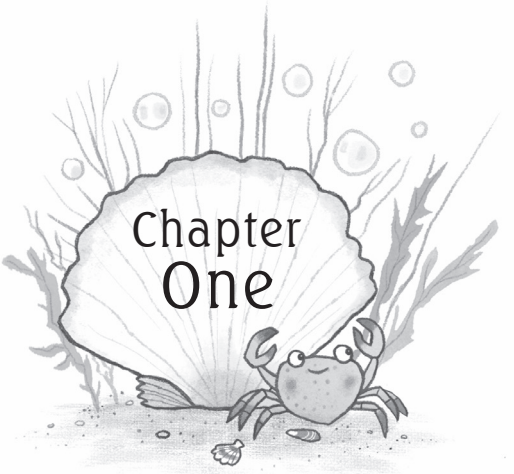




Chapter One

Mermaid School was nearly finished for the weekend. Marnie Blue stared at the starfish clock on the rocky wall of the Oceanography Cave and anxiously chewed on the end of her long blonde plait.

'Miss Blue?'

Marnie jumped. She stared at her oceanography teacher. 'What was the question, Mr Scampi?' she said.



Mr Scampi raised his lobster claws to the ceiling. 'Looking at the clock, Miss Blue, always at the clock! You are dreaming of your wonderful weekend at the Centre for Recreational Activity in the Lagoon, no?'



'It's actually called CORAL, Mr Scampi,' said Gilly Seaflower pertly from the back of the cave. 'For short. I'm SO excited that we're all going this weekend.'

There were several cheers around the Oceanography Cave.

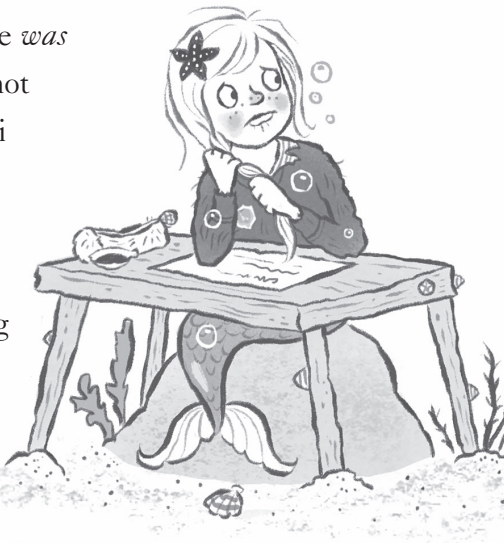
'I want to try all the activities!' said Dora Agua.

'I want to eat all the food!' said Mintie Spratt.

'I want to sleep in the BEST bed in the BEST dorm with my BEST FRIEND Mabel and no one else,' said Gilly. She could be a bit possessive about her friend, Mabel Anemone.

Mabel rolled her eyes. She'd made friends with Marnie and the others on their recent trip to Queen Maretta's Palace, to Gilly's disgust. This should have made Marnie feel better (she liked Mabel), but it didn't.

'Thank you, Miss Seaflower,' said Mr Scampi. 'You are picturing all the exciting activities at CORAL, Miss Blue, hmm? The sing-songs and the picnics and the activities? Well, I have activities in my classroom too! And my class is not yet finished.'



Marnie bit her lip. She *was* picturing CORAL, but not for the reason Mr Scampi said. She hadn't given a thought to the activities or the picnics, the dorm-sharing or the food.

Everyone had been talking about CORAL this week. Marnie had heard a hundred tales from mermaids with older brothers and sisters who'd been to the lagoon activity centre: about the secret swims, and the seaweed snacks at midnight – and the scary stories in the dorms.

'Perhaps you would like to stay in school for extra oceanography lessons instead of this trip to CORAL, hmm?' said Mr Scampi crossly.

'Can I?' said Marnie without thinking.

The rest of the class giggled. Mr Scampi glared at them too. 'And perhaps the rest of you would also like these extra classes?' he said.

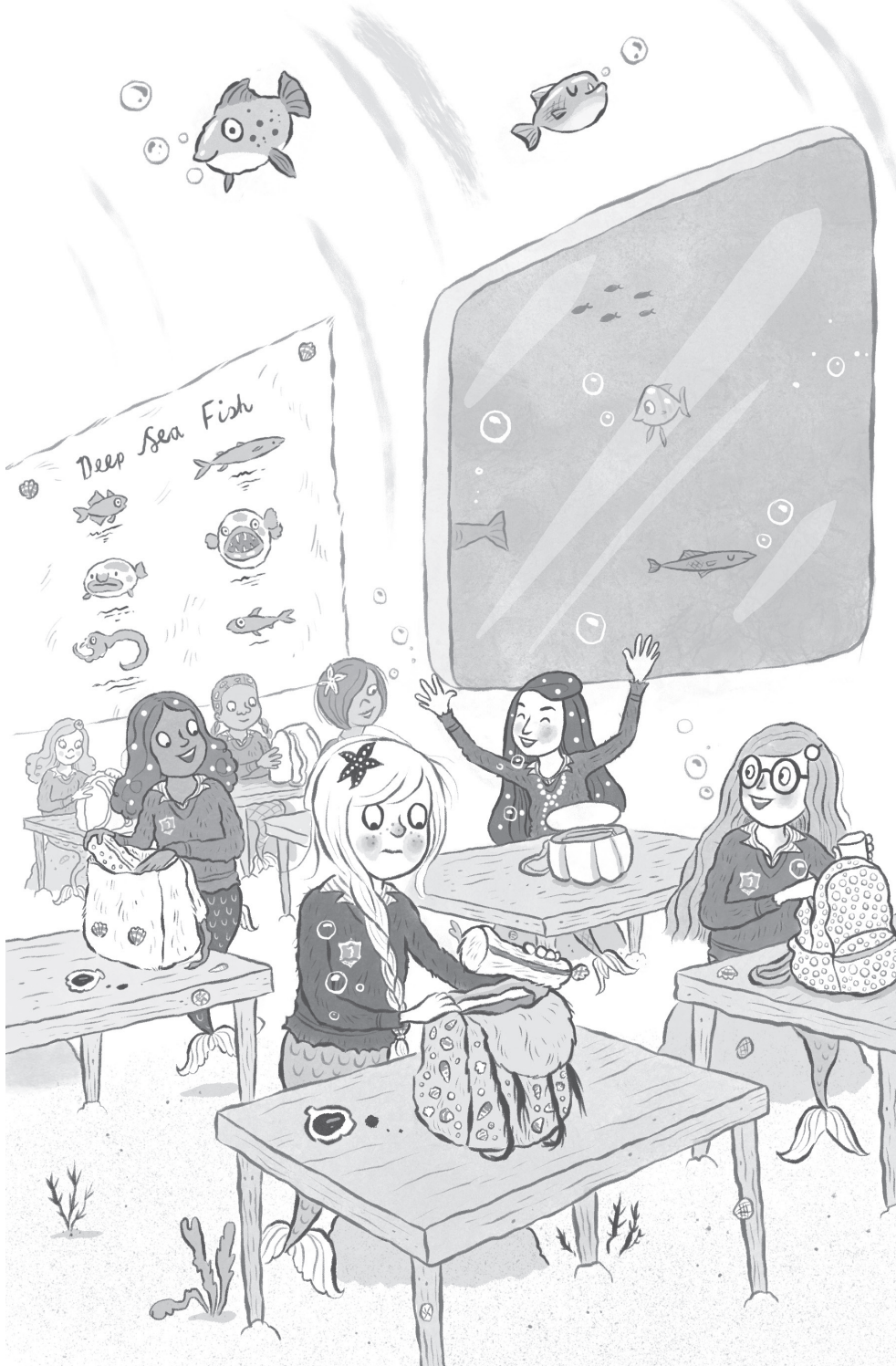
The giggling died away at once. Everyone bent their heads over Mr Scampi's sea-grass worksheet on the nocturnal habits of stonefish. The thought of staying in school while the rest of the class went to CORAL was unthinkable.

Except Marnie *was* thinking about it. A lot.

The class settled down again. Marnie noticed unhappily that the starfish clock had moved forward five starfish minutes. She went back to chewing her plait, doing her best to keep her eyes on her desk. She hated getting into trouble.

The bell for the end of the day finally rang out through the rocky walls of the cave. Everyone cheered. Marnie could hear lots of chatter about CORAL as the mermaids around her packed up their things. She wished she felt excited. But she just felt as if her tummy was full of rocks rolling and grinding against each other.

'CORAL here we come!' whooped Orla Finnegan, one of Marnie's best friends. 'My sister said it was her best Mermaid School experience ever. We'll be in a dorm together, so we can stay up all night and eat snacks and none of us are allowed to go to sleep until we've had at least ten ghost stories and a sing-song.'



'I'm bringing my fish-spotting kit,' said Pearl Cockle, Marnie's other best friend. 'There's an amazing reef next to CORAL.'

'Hope you don't sneeze all weekend, Pearl,' said Dora Agua with a giggle.

'I'm not allergic to CORAL,' said Pearl. She took off her glasses and polished them on a piece of seaweed. 'I'm allergic to *coral*. There's a difference.'

Orla's eyes gleamed. 'If that reef has grown near CORAL, that means it's near the old shipwreck,' she said in a spooky voice. 'And it's going to be full of the ghosts of drowned human sailors. You'll find a ghost and gaze into its weird *human* eyes, Pearl, and then – RARGH!!'

She curled her hands into creepy claws and waved them in Pearl's face.



Mabel Anemone gave a little scream.

'It wasn't THAT scary, Mabel,' said Gilly. She didn't like it when Mabel reacted to anyone else's stories or jokes. 'I know some MUCH scarier stories than that.'

'Competition,' said Orla at once. 'Who can tell the scariest story in the dorm on our first night.'

Marnie silently filled her pearl backpack with her pens and worksheets. Orla's story about the human sailor ghosts was in her head now. She couldn't imagine anything worse than a scary story competition in the CORAL dorm, where the windows overlooked the spooky shipwreck and she wasn't in her own bed and her mum was miles away. She wondered a little wildly if it really was too late to take up Mr Scampi on his offer of extra oceanography lessons.

'You're very quiet, Marnie,' said Mabel, noticing. 'What's up?'

Marnie tried to smile. 'I'm nervous,' she said. 'I've never stayed away from home before.'

'It'll be great!' Mabel promised. 'Crazy games and amazing dares and creepy stories ALL NIGHT, right next to an awesome spooky shipwreck. What could be better than that?'

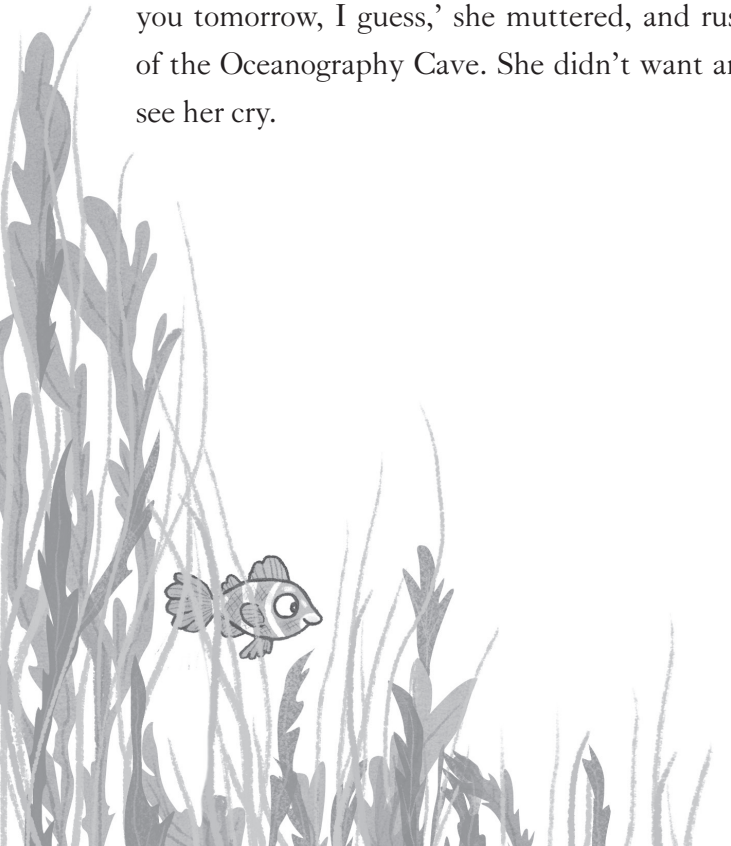
'I don't know why you bother, Mabel,' said Gilly with a sigh.

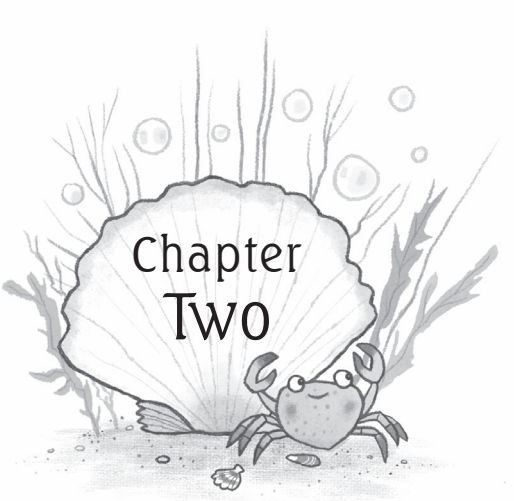
'She *bothers* because she's Marnie's friend,' said Orla. 'And mine. And Pearl's, and Dora's. You have to get used to sharing her, Gilly.'

'I'm friends with EVERYONE,' said Mabel. She put her arm around Gilly.

Gilly shook Mabel off irritably and seized her bag. 'Whatever,' she grumbled.

Marnie grabbed her pearl backpack. 'See you tomorrow, I guess,' she muttered, and rushed out of the Oceanography Cave. She didn't want anyone to see her cry.





Chapter Two

Marnie swam as fast as she could back home, clutching tightly on to her backpack. In her head, ghostly human sailors from the old shipwreck were swimming right behind her, trying to bite her tail. Why oh WHY did she have to go to CORAL tomorrow?

She'd never been so happy to see her shell-encrusted cave in her life. She rushed into the kitchen and slammed the door behind her.

Marnie's mum Daphne gave a little scream of shock and leaped up from the kitchen table. A driftwood gameboard and several brightly coloured shells fell on to the rocky floor of the cave. Horace, the anglerfish who lived in the ceiling, switched his light off and on three times in confusion.

'Lolloping lobsters!' Daphne gasped. She pressed her hand to her heart. 'Has the Kraken come to eat us all?'



Marnie's glamorous aunt Christabel stayed sitting down. She held a beautiful pearly shell between two midnight-blue fingernails. 'The Kraken probably wants my autograph,' she said. Christabel was a famous singer, and her radio show was broadcast across the whole of Mermaid Lagoon.

Marnie was panting too hard to speak. 'Not . . . the Kraken,' she gasped.

Daphne sat down again. 'I've dropped all my shells now,' she said fretfully.

'You were losing anyway, Daffy,' said Christabel. She put her pearly shell on the table and picked up the driftwood board. 'Would you like a game of backsalmon,

Marnie? I've just got time before my date with Herman, that lovely tour guide from Queen Maretta's Palace.'

Marnie shook her head. 'No thank you,' she whispered. 'I'm going to bed.'

'Before supper?' said Daphne.

'I expect she wants a good night's sleep before the excitement of CORAL tomorrow,' said Christabel. 'Neptune knows, no one gets a wink in that place. They're all having too much fun. Get OFF, Garbo,' she added. 'That's MY shell.'

Christabel's pet goldfish Garbo swam into the corner in a sulk. Christabel's beautiful pearly shell was just the sort of thing she loved to steal for her bowl.

'I've packed your bag, Marnie, ready for the morning!' said Daphne brightly. 'It's just beside the front door. It's full of your favourite snacks.'

'And I've treated you to a new hairbrush,' said Christabel. 'The CORAL activities will play havoc with your beauty regime.'

Marnie didn't want any snacks or a new hairbrush. She wanted to go into her room and not come out again all weekend.

'I don't want any supper,' she muttered. 'See you tomorrow.'

The little phosphorescent fish that lived in Marnie's bedroom walls glowed sleepily as she swam into her room and threw herself down on her bed. The heavy grinding feeling in her tummy felt worse than ever. Perhaps she was coming down with the fish flu.

She sat up suddenly. She could pretend to be ill! Why hadn't she thought of that before? She could make herself look really ill and fake a temperature and cough really loudly until her mum came in. Then Daphne would tell her she couldn't go to CORAL and everything would be OK!

Marnie pounced on some slimy algae in one corner and smeared it on to her cheeks, giving herself a greenish tinge. Then she swam really hard, round and round her room, until she was breathing heavily and her forehead felt boiling hot. She messed up her hair, jumped into bed and started coughing as loudly as she could.

'KURgghh! KUrgghhh! KuRRGGH!'

There was a knock at the door. Garbo zoomed inside in a flash of gold as Christabel peeped in. 'I'm just heading out,' she said. She patted her neatly styled hair. 'I don't want to keep Herman waiting. Is everything all right?'

'Get Mum,' Marnie croaked. She waved at her green cheeks and her flushed face. 'I'm ill. Super ill. Mega ill. I can't go to CORAL tomorrow and I'm so sad.'

'Right,' said Christabel, swimming closer.

'KURRgGGH,' Marnie added.

Christabel smoothed Marnie's hair away from her forehead. 'Now tell me the truth, Marnie,' she said.



'Why don't you want to go to CORAL?'

Marnie slumped against her pillows. She'd never been able to fool her aunt the way she could fool her mum. 'You're going to think I'm silly,' she muttered.



'I'm sillier,' said Christabel. She pulled a face that made her look like a pufferfish.

Marnie giggled a tiny bit. 'You're right,' she admitted. 'I don't want to go to CORAL. Can't I just stay at home with you and Mum?'

'It's only for a couple of nights,' said Christabel. 'And you'll have such a lot of fun! Snacks and games, spooky stories in the dorm and crazy dares in the lagoon—'

'There's nothing FUN about spooky stories and crazy dares,' Marnie wailed. 'They're horrible!'

Christabel tapped her neatly painted lips with one fingernail. 'I see,' she said.

The tears spilled down Marnie's cheeks. 'There's a spooky old shipwreck full of human ghosts next to

CORAL and . . . and I don't want to g-g-g-oo-oo!'

Marnie sobbed and hiccupped on her aunt's sea-silk shoulder. Christabel patted and soothed her while Garbo tried to tickle Marnie's ears with her little tail.

'Tell you what,' said Christabel when Marnie finally stopped crying. 'As a special treat, you can take my magic shell with you to CORAL. It will protect you and keep you safe.'



Marnie scrubbed at her tear-stained face. She stared at the glowing shell in Christabel's palm. It was the one her aunt had been playing with earlier.

'What's magic about it?' Marnie asked with a sniff.

'You know how I always win at backsalmon?' Christabel twirled the shell between her fingers. Garbo tried to lick its pearly surface.

Marnie couldn't keep her eyes off the shell. 'Yes?'

Christabel lowered her voice. 'I win because of this.'

'No way, stingray,' Marnie said.

'Yes way, manta ray,' said Christabel. 'King Neptune gave me this shell. I sang for him when I was younger, and he said to me, "Miss Blue, you have a rare gift. Allow me to give you an even rarer one. This shell will protect your life and career. This shell will make you a star. THIS SHELL . . ."' Christabel paused. '"THIS SHELL will make sure that you win every single game of backsalmon that you ever play."'

Marnie's mouth hung open.

'It's cheating, I suppose,' said Christabel. She patted her hair. 'But your mother doesn't need to know that. And now – it's yours.'

'It's really magic?' Marnie breathed.

Christabel spread her hands. 'I'm a successful music star. And I always win at backsalmon. What further proof do you need?'

Marnie gazed at the shell in amazement. Now she thought about it, it was glowing in an extra-magicky sort of way. For the first time since the CORAL trip was announced, she realised that she didn't feel anxious. Maybe she was even looking forward to the trip a little bit.

'Can I really take it with me?' she said. 'To CORAL? And it will protect me and keep me safe?'

Christabel dropped it into Marnie's hands. 'I promise with all my heart that with this shell, you will have a MAGICAL time at CORAL,' she said. 'It will be the best weekend of your life. Oh, and there will be a little surprise on Sunday,' she added, kissing Marnie on the nose. 'So you can look forward to that as well. Can't you?'

Marnie nodded.

