

# CHAPTER 1

‘**N**ow, you slithering monster of the deep, prepare to die!’

The knight charged. The giant sea slug bared its teeth and growled, moving to protect the treasure. But the knight was quick. Her sword plunged into the soft, slimy flesh of the monster.

‘This is the bit where you die,’ said the knight.

‘I don’t want to die,’ said the sea slug.

‘But you have to. You’re the baddy.’

‘Why do I always play the baddy?’

‘Marie! You said you would.’

‘How about – this time – the knight dies and gets dragged away by the sea slug to—’

‘No. That’s not the story. That’s not how I wrote it. The knight kills the monster and reclaims the treasure and they all live happily ever after.’

‘All except the sea slug . . .’

‘It’s just a bit part.’

The sea slug began to peel off her costume.

A CLOCK OF STARS

‘What are you doing?’ said the knight. ‘We haven’t finished yet.’

‘I have.’

‘But what about the dress rehearsal?’

The monster opened the treasure chest and ran her feelers over the gems. ‘Well, if I’m just a bit part, then you’ll be fine without me.’

‘Hands off – that’s my rock collection,’ said the knight. She dropped her sword and reached for the treasure chest. The lid moved more easily than she’d expected and it came down hard, squashing a few of the sea slug’s tentacles. The monster yowled.

This time they really fought. Underneath her outfit, the sea slug was a little girl with pinkish skin and wild red hair. Her name was Marie.

Marie stuffed the stolen rocks into her pockets. ‘You said I could keep one stone!’ she yelled.

The knight had short brown hair that she’d cut herself and smudges of freckles that ran across her pale cheeks like warpaint. Her armour was constructed from tinfoil and cereal boxes, and her name was Imogen. She was older than Marie, so she knew better – about pretty much everything.

‘I said you could keep one stone if you acted in my play,’ said Imogen, ‘and you haven’t.’ She grabbed Marie and emptied the stones from her pockets.

THE SHADOW MOTH

‘Mum!’ cried Marie. ‘Imogen’s picking on me again!’

‘No, I’m not!’ yelled Imogen, releasing Marie’s arm.

Marie ran into the house with one hand in her pocket. Imogen wondered if she still had a stone. She’d extract it later.

Imogen picked up her rock collection as rain began to fall. If only she could act every character in the play herself, then she wouldn’t need Marie. It was hard work making her sister a star.

She followed Marie inside and dumped her cargo by the back door. Mum was standing in the hallway, wearing a long red dress that Imogen hadn’t seen before. Marie was hiding behind her, with just one eye and a few curls visible.

Imogen knew how this would go. She was about to get told off. Imogen hated being told off. After all, she hadn’t meant to squish Marie’s fingers in the treasure chest.

Imogen eyeballed her mum. ‘Why are you so dressed up?’ she said.

‘Never mind that,’ snapped Mum. ‘*You* are in trouble. I’m not putting up with this behaviour any more – the fighting with your sister, the mess you’ve made in the garden—’

‘It’s a sea-slug cave!’

‘Imogen! You’re too old for this nonsense! And you’re certainly too old to be making Marie cry.’

‘She started it.’

A CLOCK OF STARS

‘Well, I’m finishing it,’ said Mum. ‘Grandma’s looking after you for the rest of the day and she’ll take you to the tea rooms if you’re good. Are you going to be good?’

‘Where are you going?’ asked Imogen.

‘It doesn’t matter where I’m going. I’ve left you homemade pizza for tonight. You’ll have a great time. Now promise me you’ll be nice to your sister.’

Marie’s face had turned blotchy from fake crying. She looked like a half-ripened raspberry. Imogen did *not* want to be nice to her sister.

‘Come on, Imogen,’ said Mum in a softer voice. ‘I’m counting on you.’

The doorbell rang and Mum turned in a circle. ‘He’s early!’ she cried.

‘Who’s early?’ asked Marie.

‘You’ll see,’ said Mum.