EJ12 GIRL HERO

IN THE DARK

ten men

Chapter •1
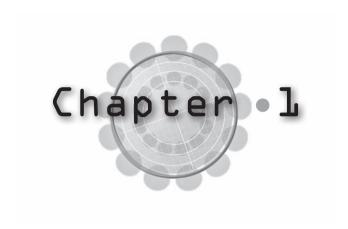
It was night and Emma Jacks was lying in bed wide-awake, feeling nervous. In fact, she was quite scared. The hall light was on but it still seemed very dark to Emma, and Emma didn't like the dark. You couldn't see what was going on, and when you couldn't see what was going on, you sometimes imagined scary things.

Emma turned her bedside light on and that helped, sort of. There were still shadows and noises—and every noise she heard worried her.

Was the thing making the noise inside, was it outside? Was it outside but wanting to come inside? Was it something dangerous?

Part of Emma knew she was being silly but the other half, slightly more than half, couldn't stop feeling scared. And once she started thinking about one scary thing, more things seemed to tumble into her head. At least she had already realised that the tall, pointy shadows that seemed to be coming towards her room from the hallway were only the coats hanging up on the coat rack. They were the same coats that hung there every day, so why did her imagination tell her that they might suddenly become something scary at night? It was the same with the dangerous shape on the end of her bed, the dangerous gym bag that was always there. It was nuts.

Then Emma heard a bang. In seconds, she was out of bed, down the hallway and into the living room where her mum was watching television. Their little husky puppy, Pip, was snuggled on her mum's lap. Bang! There it was again. It came from

the next room, the kitchen.

Mum looked up. 'Sorry Em. Dad's being a bit noisy with the rubbish bin. Did the noise wake you?' she asked.

Oh, that was the rubbish bin, Emma thought to herself. *That's embarrassing.*

'Um, no, I just wondered what that noise was but now I know, it's okay.'

'Back to bed then,' said Mum.

Emma was hoping her mum would say 'Why don't you cuddle up here and watch a bit of television first?' but it was a school night and that was unlikely to happen. She walked back down the hallway and had just reached her bedroom door when she saw a tall, dark figure standing in front of her wardrobe. Emma froze, her mouth went dry, she felt her heart beat fast and her mind started racing faster. What was it and what was it doing in her bedroom? Was it looking for her? Quickly she turned on the light…*Oh, it is my 'evil' dressing gown*, thought Emma, relieved but also embarrassed, even if there was no one else around.

This is ridiculous, thought Emma as she got back into bed. *Get a grip Emma! Are you afraid of your dressing gown now?* She lay there, eyes wide open, thinking. Why did she always get so jumpy in the dark? How was she going to cope at Hannah's slumber party if she got this nervous in her own bed? Did the other girls feel scared sometimes?

Emma started counting backwards from one thousand. Sometimes that helped her get to sleep because it was so boring. *1000, 999, 998, 997, 996, 995, maybe I need a glass of water, 994, 993, 992, yes, I think I do, 991 990, 989, 988, right, I'll go and get one.*

Emma walked back down the hallway. Both Mum and Dad were watching television now. She slipped into the room without them noticing and stopped just behind the sofa. Maybe if she stayed quiet she could sit there for a while, undetected, and watch a little television to take her mind off things? *Good idea, Em*, she thought. *No one will know I'm here.*

Wrong.

Pip must have heard her. The puppy jumped off

the sofa, saw Emma sitting behind it and, delighted that her play-friend was up again, bounded around her licking her face. Emma spluttered. Loudly.

'Emma, is that you? Why aren't you in bed?' Mum sounded slightly irritated.

'I just needed a glass of water.'

'And there's one behind the sofa?'

'Oh, um, well I saw what you were watching and thought I might…'

'Back to bed you go,' said Mum. 'You need to go to sleep or you will be grumpy and tired for school in the morning. You can take Pip with you to keep you company.'

So Emma and Pip walked back to her room. Emma checked under her bed and in her cupboard and then under her bed again just to make sure, then she jumped under the covers. Pip jumped in too, taking up her secret position under the doona next to Emma. Her dad would have a fit if he saw her. He would declare it 'a hygiene issue'.

The sound of the television from the living room made Emma feel closer to her parents and with Pip

snuggled next to her on one side and her favourite soft toy, Floppy, on the other, it was quite cosy. It was best to keep Floppy and Pip separate. Pip loved Floppy in a chew toy kind of way. Emma felt comfy, sleepy even, and her eyes slowly closed. Then from outside there was a rustling. Then a noise.

Hiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiisssssssssssssssssssssss!

Emma's eyes shot wide open and she froze. *Gee whizz, lemonfizz, what was that?*

Hiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiisssssssssssssssssssssssss!

There it was again. Emma didn't wait to hear it a third time. She jumped out of bed and ran back into the living room. Pip, thinking this was a hilarious new game, scampered behind her, barking.

'Em?' said Mum in a decidedly irritated voice.

'Why are you up again?' asked Dad.

'There's something right outside my window,' said Emma breathlessly. 'Something really noisy, something really angry. I think it is trying to get in.'

'Emma, are you…'

Hiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiissssssssssssssssssssssssssssss!

Emma jumped onto the sofa between her parents. 'There it is again!' she squealed. 'Mum, what are we going to do?'

'It's okay, Emma,' said Mum. 'That's a possum.'

'That is *not* a possum,' said Emma, fearing her mum had gone completely mad. 'Possums are cute, they have little pink noses, they nibble on things. The thing outside making that noise is some mean creature that's coming to attack us.'

'No Em, really, it's a possum,' said Mum, almost laughing. 'They make those noises to scare predators away.'

'It certainly scared me.'

'Why don't we go outside with a torch and find it so you can see for yourself?'

They went outside and Emma's mum shone the torch on to the back fence. Sure enough, halfway along the fence was a ring-tailed possum with big eyes and long tail with a white tip. The possum was sitting perfectly still, staring unblinking at Emma and her mum. Much to Emma's delight, a baby possum

was clinging to the possum's back.

'See,' said Mum, 'a possum, two possums actually.' She turned off the torch and the possum scuttled along the fence and up a tree.

'They were soooooo cute,' said Emma. 'How can something so cute make such a horrible noise?' Emma felt a bit silly. She wondered if they had possums at Hannah's house. She was starting to think about other noises that might scare her at the slumber party when her mum interrupted her thoughts.

'Look up,' said Mum. 'It's a beautiful star-bright night.'

Emma looked up. It was true. Stars were flickering, like fairy lights, all over the black night sky.

'Maybe another night we can do some star-gazing,' said her mum, 'but now it's back into bed, madam.'

This time Mum came with Emma to the bedroom, tucked her into bed and gave her a big hug. 'Sleep tight my little one,' she whispered in Emma's ear.

Emma snuggled down again, too tired to be scared anymore. *Little one is right, silly little one*, thought Emma. *I can go on missions all over the world and I am afraid of the dark? What would A1 say if she knew?*

But before she could answer that, she was, finally, asleep.

Chapter •2

A1 was the head of the **SHINE** agency, a secret organisation that protected the world from evil-doers. 'We shine a light on evil', was one of their mottoes. (**SHINE** liked mottoes and they had one for most things.) They spent a lot of time shining a light on the *SHADOW* agency, uncovering and stopping their evil plans. *SHADOW* was as bad as **SHINE** was good.

What did all this have to do with Emma Jacks? Well, when she wasn't worrying about strange noises at night, or going to school or gym or playing with

her friends or being irritated by her older brother, Bob, and other normal ten-year-old girl things, Emma Jacks was EJ12. EJ12, special agent and code-cracker, under-twelve division to be exact (which Emma liked to be). In fact, she was one of SHINE's best agents. In the agency's Shining Stars award, SHINE's Spy of the Year competition, EJ12 was in the top five.

Emma had been selected to join SHINE when she won a maths competition. SHINE used maths competitions as a way of finding clever thinkers to help them crack codes, and they had found Emma. Since then, as EJ12, she had cracked codes and gone on missions all over the world. As EJ12, Emma Jacks seemed to be able to do anything.

So how could a special agent be afraid of the dark? So far EJ12 had only been sent on day missions. She didn't know it but that was about to change.

'Emma, time to wake up,' said her mum as she pulled up the blind in Emma's bedroom.

Emma opened her eyes. The sunlight rushed into the bedroom and made her squint. She dived under her doona. 'Mum, pull down the blind pleeeeeease, it's too light!'

'That's a first,' said Mum as she left the room. 'You normally want more light. Come on sleepy head, let's get moving.'

Emma was tired. The problem with staying up late worrying about dangerous dressing gowns and strange noises was that you felt sleepy the next morning. But how different things were in the daylight—dressing gowns went back to being dressing gowns, gym bags were gym bags, and Emma wouldn't even think about checking under her bed.

Emma got dressed and went down to the kitchen. Mum, Dad and Bob were already there having breakfast.

'You'll both need to move quickly this morning,' said Mum to Emma and Bob. 'I need to be at work

early so you will have to catch the bus. Hurry up, come on!'

Excellent, thought Emma. *Hannah and Elle will probably be on the bus.*

And to Emma's delight, Hannah and Elle *and* Isi were on the bus. Isi was in Emma's gym squad but Emma was only getting to know her more now that they were in the same class at school. Emma really liked Isi. They liked a lot of the same things, particularly chocolate, and Isi was always cheerful and seemed to bounce her way through everything. Emma wondered if Isi ever got scared of the dark. She didn't think so.

As the bus pulled up to the stop, Emma could see her friends peering out the window, waving frantically. As soon as Emma climbed on, the three girls started talking at her.

'Hey, Em, we were hoping you'd catch the bus today. We've been talking about my slumber party,' said Hannah.

'We're thinking we should have a theme,' said Elle.

'Em, Em, it's going to be sooo fun,' said Isi.

'Hi guys. A theme is a great idea,' said Emma, 'but what theme?'

'First we thought a dance party,' said Hannah.

'That would be cool,' agreed Emma.

'Then we thought a pyjama party,' said Isi.

'But won't we be in pyjamas anyway?' asked Emma, who was very logical.

'Exactly, that's what we thought,' said Isi, 'so then we had a better idea—a spooky slumber party!'

'Oh,' said Emma, trying to sound as if that was a good surprise rather than a completely bad surprise. 'What would we do for that?'

'It would be awesome, Em,' said Elle. 'We can tell ghost stories, have a midnight feast...'

'And play "murder in the dark" outside,' broke in Hannah.

'And watch scary movies!' shrieked Isi, who was so excited she was nearly falling off her seat. 'What do you think Em? How cool will that be?'

'Yeah, but a dance party could be really fun too,' said Emma, looking at Hannah.

Hannah smiled back. 'Spooky will be fun, Em, don't you think?'

'Oh I don't know,' said Emma, but she did know and if she couldn't tell these friends what she was thinking, who could she tell? 'What if we get scared?'

'That's the point, dummy,' said Elle.

'No, I mean *really* scared,' said Emma.

'Don't worry,' said Hannah, putting her arm around Emma. 'We'll look after you.'

But Emma wasn't convinced. She loved her friends and wanted to join in but was fairly sure she would be really, really scared at a spooky slumber party. Perhaps she shouldn't go.

The bus pulled into school. The girls got out and as they walked into the school grounds they saw Alisha walking in as well. Isi bounded up to her and Elle shouted, 'Alisha, Alisha, over here!'

Alisha ran over, colliding with Isi who gave her a big hug in typical Isi style.

'Alisha, you'll never guess what we thought of for Hannah's slumber party—a spooky party.'

'Cool,' said Alisha. 'I could bring my glow-in-the-dark mask.'

Oh excellent, thought Emma. *Not.* Why was everyone so keen to be scared? Was Emma the only one who got scared and *didn't* find it fun? She bet Alisha loved creeping around in the dark in her glowing mask.

At lunchtime, the girls were still talking about the slumber party, thinking of even more ways they could scare themselves. Emma had been looking forward to the slumber party but now she wasn't sure she wanted to go. She was getting scared just talking about it. What would the others think if she got scared? She knew Hannah and Elle wouldn't make fun of her but would Isi and Alisha think she was a baby? She really liked her new friends but would they still like her if they thought she was a scaredy-cat?

Piinngg!

The sudden sound made Emma jump but she pulled her phone out of her pocket and saw the

screen flashing, a nice aqua flash. Aqua was Emma's favourite colour and an aqua flash on her phone could mean only one thing—a mission alert from SHINE.