

Chapter One

“Don’t you slow down!” the coach shouted. One of the boys had turned up late, and now the whole football team was suffering for it. From the fence line, Joan watched them stumble past in yet another lap. Most of the boys were gasping, but at the front of the pack, Nick’s pace was steady, as if he could have kept this up for days.

Go home, Joan told herself. She’d been weak today. She’d walked down here after school, hoping for a glimpse of him. Well, now she’d had it, and as always it felt like a punch to the gut. *He doesn’t remember you. He doesn’t know you anymore.*

“All right!” the coach shouted. “I think you’ve had enough.”

There were groans of relief, and the boys staggered to a stop. Some dropped to the ground, exhausted. Others grasped their knees, trying to catch their breath. Still a few strides ahead, Nick slowed to a jog, and then turned to walk back to his teammates.

He glanced idly towards the fence. Joan’s heart stuttered as his gaze skated over and beyond her without interest or recognition.

“Nick!” one of the boys panted from the ground. “You gotta keep up, mate. Team captain can’t be trailing behind us all the time.”

Nick laughed and went over to help the boy up. “Need a hand, Jameson?”

"I need a defibrillator," the boy grumbled. But he gripped Nick's offered hand and struggled up.

Joan's breath caught at Nick's unguarded smile. He'd always been so solemn when she'd known him. He'd had the world on his shoulders. It occurred to Joan now that she didn't know him anymore either—not this Nick.

She felt that familiar pang of longing for the boy who wasn't here. She suppressed it ruthlessly. That Nick was gone, and she shouldn't want him back. This was Nick as he *should* have been. A guy with an ordinary life.

Go home, she told herself again. And this time, she hefted her schoolbag higher and turned away from the fence.

It was mid-November, and the trees were nearly bare. Cold cut through Joan's trousers as she walked across the empty school grounds. After hours, the whole place had an abandoned quality. The teachers' parking lot was desolate—all concrete and patchy weeds. Joan made her way through it, past the library, and down to the back field.

Joan's phone buzzed: a message from Dad. *Nearly home? I made pineapple tarts*. A photo arrived. Flaky pastries cooling on a rack. *Look professional huh!*

He'd been checking in on Joan a lot lately; he knew something was wrong. "You seem really quiet," he'd said to her last night. "Everything okay at school? With your friends?"

Sometimes, Joan wished she could just tell him the truth.

Gran died, Dad. They all died. Gran and Aunt Ada and Uncle Gus and Bertie.

But she couldn't tell him that. Because they *hadn't* died. Only Joan remembered that night. Only she remembered Gran's last desperate moments, and the thick warmth of Gran's blood, the

metallic smell of it. Joan had pressed against the wound, trying to hold Gran's body together, and Gran's breaths had rattled, further and further apart until they'd stopped.

Joan breathed in now, letting the cold air catch in her lungs. None of that had happened, she reminded herself. Gran and the rest of the Hunts were in London—just an hour away by train. They were *fine*.

Joan messaged Dad back. *Looks great! Be home soon.* Then she shoved her hands into her pockets. It was getting colder. Above, the sky was heavy with darkening clouds. There was a storm coming.

She fought the wind as she crossed the field. Her hair whipped around her face, and her blue blazer billowed. She shouldn't have stayed back for that glimpse of Nick. Seeing him—being unseen by him—had thrown her back into that first shock of being in the world without him. There was no place or time she could go to find him. He was gone.

Lightning flashed and the air sharpened. Joan walked faster, absently counting the seconds. *One one-thousand, two one-thousand, three one-thousand . . .* Thunder rolled at the count of five. The storm was maybe fifteen minutes away. She shrugged out of her blazer and shoved it into her bag. She didn't mind the rain, but she only had the one school blazer, and she didn't fancy wearing it again tomorrow, damp.

She was near the gate when the next flash of lightning came. *One one-thousand, two—*

A familiar voice sounded behind her, startling her. "Excuse me, I have—" The rest of his words were drowned out by thunder. Joan's heartbeat sounded even louder in her ears. *Nick.*

It wasn't him, she told herself. She was just hearing what she wanted to hear.

But when she turned, it *was* Nick, alone on the field with her, his pace easy and smooth, as familiar as his voice. His dark hair was cut differently now—swept over his brow—but his eyes were just as they’d always been, as sincere and honest as an old-fashioned hero, the kind who rescued cats from trees and people from burning buildings.

For a moment, Joan could almost imagine it really was him—*her* Nick, with all his memories intact, coming after her because he’d remembered her. Her feelings were a tangled skein of trepidation, fear, and a horrible hope.

He stopped, just out of arm’s reach. Joan hadn’t been this close to him since the night in the library when they’d kissed. That night, the other Nick’s existence had ended. *No*, she corrected herself. That night *she’d* ended him. She’d chosen her family over him. Monsters over the hero.

Whatever was on her face, it made Nick’s expression change to apology. “Sorry, I didn’t mean to scare you!” He held out her phone. “I saw you drop this back there.”

Joan searched his face. Now that he was closer, she couldn’t fool herself. He was looking right at her, and there was no recognition in his eyes at all. This version of him even held himself differently. The other Nick had carried himself with a certain dangerous tension: the understanding that he might have to fight and kill. This Nick’s stance was open and untrained. Joan should have felt relieved, she knew, but she was hit with an ache of grief like a physical wound.

She accepted the phone from him, trying not to feel anything when his fingers brushed hers. “Thank you,” she heard herself say.

Nick smiled, small and so familiar that Joan could hardly bear it. “I’m always losing mine,” he said.

“Really?” Joan was surprised into asking. He’d always been careful with details. She’d never known him to lose anything.

“Well—” Nick’s smile warmed into something more relaxed than Joan had ever seen on him. “Really, my little brothers are always stealing it.”

“Brothers?” Joan echoed. She heard the wonder in her own voice. His brothers were alive. Joan had known it, but somehow hearing him say it felt like a miracle. The Nick she’d known had been tortured over and over, his whole family murdered in front of him. Joan had seen the recordings. She’d never forget them—not one second of them. All those bodies on the kitchen floor.

“Brothers and sisters,” Nick said, still smiling. “Six of us, if you can believe it.” And Joan heard an echo of that other Nick telling her, with shadows in his eyes: *Three brothers and two sisters. My brothers and I all slept in the TV room until I was seven.*

“Big family,” Joan said. They’d had this conversation before, alone in a house in London, curled up next to each other as darkness had fallen.

Lightning illuminated the field. It shook Joan out of herself, and she was horrified to realize that she’d been about to talk about herself too. *I’m an only child, but I have a big extended family.* What was she thinking? A minute alone with him, and she’d forgotten herself.

She made herself start walking again and felt a twinge of disquiet when Nick fell into easy step beside her. It was too comfortable, a worn groove from a different lifetime.

“I think I’ve seen you around,” Nick said, and Joan looked at him surprised. “You’re in the year below me, right?” he said.

“Yeah,” Joan managed, trying to ignore the warm glow it gave her. He’d noticed her. She’d thought— Well, it didn’t matter

what she'd thought. There couldn't be anything between them — not this time, and not last time. Not ever.

Nick ducked his head, shyly. "I'm still pretty new at this school."

This time, Joan didn't trust her voice. She'd never forget her first day back at school after the terrible summer, when her body had still been telling her that she was on the run. She'd jumped at every raised voice, every slam of a locker door. Sitting in her stuffy little classrooms, with their single exits, had been close to unbearable.

That first day, she'd walked up the school corridor with her friend Margie.

Holy shit, Margie had said. *Have you seen that new guy?*

New guy? Joan had asked.

So hot, Margie had said. *And not just normal hot. I mean proper Hollywood hot.*

And then they'd turned the corner, and there he'd been. Nick. In their school uniform. Tall and square-jawed and perfect. And Joan hadn't known whether she wanted to run towards him or the other way.

Now, a few months later in November, he was already about fifteen rungs more popular at school than Joan had ever been. Nick Ward, the football captain after two months. The hottest guy in school. The smartest guy in school. Most of Joan's year had a hopeless crush on him.

"Do you have far to go?" Nick said now. Joan shook her head. She was just a few streets from home. He smiled then — the smile that made half the school weak at the knees. "I'm just here." He pointed at one of the houses across the road.

Oh. So, this was it then. *Remember this*, Joan told herself. Because there wouldn't be any more conversations like this. She couldn't let this happen again.

Nick's dark hair was falling over his eyes. There was a stray leaf on his collar—a red rowan leaf, the last of the season. Joan let herself wonder just one more time. *Nick, don't you remember who you are?*

"You have a leaf—" She gestured at her own neck.

"Oh no, really?" He laughed. A flush climbed his throat. "Not very smooth." He brushed at his collar. "Gone?"

It was still there, hooked to the shoulder of his green and gray football jersey. Joan shook her head. "Can I?" She tried not to notice how his flush deepened. He nodded.

Joan reached up. Her own breath hitched, and she could tell that he'd registered it. His eyes darkened. She half expected him to stop her—to catch her wrist. But he didn't flinch, not even when she brushed her knuckles against the back of his neck, just touching the soft bristles at his nape.

"Gone?" he asked. His voice deepened, like just before he'd kissed her.

Joan made herself smile back at him. "Yeah," she said. She snagged the leaf and took her hand away, very careful not to take any life from him. "All gone."

He was gone. He was really gone. Joan felt empty, suddenly. And so lonely. She was the only one who remembered him as he'd once been. A boy who could walk unarmed into a room full of monsters and have them flee in fear. A boy who'd protected humans from the predators among them. Not even he remembered.

He didn't even know that monsters existed anymore.

There was still a tinge of red along Nick's cheekbones. Joan told herself that it was from the cold. "Maybe I'll see you around?" he said.

Joan was rescued from answering by shouts from the house. Two kids came bounding across the road—two miniature Nicks,

a boy and girl of about six. They had Nick's dark hair and dark eyes. The boy had thick black-rimmed glasses that made him look like a tiny professor.

Nick jumped to meet them, corralling them onto the pavement. "Hey, hey!" he said to them. "What do we do when we cross the road? We wait, don't we? We wait and we look both ways!" He tucked them close, an arm around each of them.

Another girl came hurrying after the kids. She was older than Nick. Maybe nineteen. "Careful!" she said to them, echoing Nick. "Be careful now!" She had lighter brown hair than the other three, and her northern accent was more pronounced than Nick's.

"We're helping Mary make chicken!" the boy announced to Nick.

"Robbie dropped it!" the girl said. "On the floor!"

The boy scowled at her behind rain-speckled glasses. "You weren't supposed to say!" he said. He turned to the older girl: Mary. "*She* licked the skin! The raw skin!"

Mary sighed. "Come on," she said. "Holding hands this time." She held out her own hand. Unexpectedly, she threw a wry smile at Joan. "Hi!" she said. "Sorry to interrupt your chat."

"Hi." Joan made herself smile back.

Mary turned her attention back to the children, beckoning them, and Joan's eyes caught on her ring. It was plain black with no shine. Joan had seen it before. Nick had worn it on a chain, tucked under his shirt. Joan had never known it had belonged to his sister.

"See you at school?" Nick said to Joan. He'd taken the little boy's hand.

Joan nodded. Mary. Robbie. The little girl must be Alice. Nick had talked about them—just a bit. Joan hadn't known it at the

time, but he'd been grieving their loss for as long as she'd known him.

She had a flash again of the kitchen in the videos. Of all three of them—Mary, Robbie and Alice—lying still and dead. And Nick . . . Joan's heart clenched at the way he was smiling down at the little ones now. He'd shoved a knife into their killer's neck, face contorted with misery and horror. Joan would never forget the sound he'd made.

Joan couldn't hold the smile. "See you," she managed. She turned fast.

She walked up the steep slope of the hill, pushing herself until the physical exertion overrode the tightness in her chest. Gusts of wind stirred up sticks and stray leaves. Heavy drops of rain began to fall. The wind carried fragments of conversation up the hill.

"—that pretty girl?" That was Nick's older sister, her tone teasing and fond.

"*Mary!*" Nick said, sounding so much like an embarrassed younger brother that Joan found herself almost smiling for real.

High laughs and shrieks from the kids, and then Joan was too far away to hear anything more. Safely out of sight, she squeezed her eyes shut.

She took a deep breath and let it out slowly. It was okay, she told herself. She shouldn't have spoken to him, but it wouldn't happen again. She'd make sure of that. And the stuff she was feeling right now—she could handle it. Heavy rain hit her face like tears. She could handle this. She'd been handling it.

She was back here in the real world. No monster-slayers. No monsters. Just her normal life at home. And that was how it would be from now on.

* * *

"I'm home!" she called to Dad. She was hit with warmth and sweet pastry smells: butter and pineapple jam and ginger.

"Hi!" Dad called from the kitchen. As Joan kicked off her shoes, he emerged with a plate of pineapple tarts. "I've already eaten five!" he said. He saw her then and frowned. "Where's your blazer?"

Joan slid her shoes under the rack with the side of her foot and grabbed a tart from the plate. "Didn't want it all rained on." She bit into the pastry, cupping her free hand underneath to catch flaky crumbs as she followed Dad to the kitchen.

"It's supposed to be rained on," Dad said. "It's supposed to stop you from being rained on."

"This is really good," Joan said with her mouth full. "Oh my God! How many did you make?" she added as she saw the kitchen. There were dozens of tarts cooling on racks—on the stove, on the bench, on top of the fridge.

"You give some to your friends!" Dad said. "And we'll take some tomorrow!"

"Tomorrow?" Joan said. "What's happening—" She stopped. There was a sticky note on the kitchen bench, in Dad's handwriting. *Hunt family dinner 6pm*. The jam turned sour at the back of Joan's throat. "What's that?"

"Hmm? Oh. Your Gran phoned this afternoon."

"She did?"

"She's invited us to dinner tomorrow." Dad rummaged in the drawer. "Down in London with the whole Hunt family."

Joan's stomach tightened. She hadn't spoken to any of the Hunts since she'd come home. Her cousin Ruth had messaged her a few times.

Hey, if you ever want to talk about the whole being-a-monster thing, we can do that.

Even if you don't want to talk about it, we should. You might think you can shut it out, but you can't.

Joan had told herself she'd reply, but weeks and now months had passed, and Ruth's messages were still unanswered.

"I got the feeling that your Gran wanted to talk to you about something," Dad added.

"About what?" Joan said.

"Oh, you know your Gran," Dad said, sounding distracted. "She doesn't like to say much on the phone. *There you are!*" He produced a pair of black oven mitts from the drawer.

Joan found herself remembering a different kitchen—Gran's kitchen in London, cocoa bubbling on the stove. Joan had had a strange encounter with Gran's neighbor. He'd pushed her into a wall one morning, and then night had abruptly fallen.

Joan had run back to Gran's place, terrified. *He did something to me*, she'd told Gran.

Gran's green eyes had been luminous in the low kitchen light. *He didn't do something to you*, she'd told Joan. *You did something to him*. She'd leaned close. *You're a monster, Joan*.

Two months ago, Joan had learned what the rest of the Hunts had always known. Her Mum's side of the family were monsters: *real* monsters. They stole life from humans. They used that life to travel in time.

Now, in Joan's own kitchen, there was a slight stirring as if from a breeze, although nothing in the room moved. Dad didn't react. Joan had felt it with her monster sense. The wave came again, rippling through the world without actually disturbing anything.

Sometimes, the timeline seemed like a living thing—a creature with a will of its own. Tonight, Joan perceived it as a natural force, as if the storm itself had come inside.

Dad closed the oven door with his elbow. “So tomorrow night?”

You might think you can shut it out, but you can't. Joan folded her arms across her chest. “I don’t know,” she said. “I’m working tomorrow.”

“Don’t you finish up at four?”

“I’ve got an essay.”

“Can you do that on Sunday?” Dad asked. “The thing is, your Gran reminded me . . .” He hesitated. “Tomorrow is the fifteenth anniversary of your Mum’s death. I think your Gran wants to spend some time with you.” He looked down at his oven mitts. “*I should have remembered it was a special day,*” he said. “I suppose you and I always celebrate your Mum’s birthday instead.”

A familiar pressure of emotion started, trying to be felt. Joan shoved it down. She hadn’t expected Dad to say that. Dad talked about Mum all the time, but Gran *never* talked about her.

“Is that okay with you?” Dad said. When Joan didn’t answer immediately, he said softer: “Joan, are *you* okay?”

He’d been asking that question in different ways for weeks. *You seem so quiet lately. Is anything going on? Have you had a fight with your friends?*

Joan tried out the truth in her head.

I found out that I’m a monster, Dad. The Hunt side of the family are all monsters.

Or another truth.

The boy I loved was a monster-slayer. He killed Gran and the rest of

the family. But I unmade him. I unraveled his life. And now the Hunts are alive again. But they don't remember.

He doesn't remember me.

The hollow grief of it hit her again. She couldn't tell Dad any of it. He wouldn't believe her. She didn't *want* him to believe her. She wanted him safe, here at home, far away from the world of monsters.

"I'm fine," she said. She tried to make it sound real. "Just. You know. Stuff."

Dad searched her face. "What stuff?"

"Normal stuff." Joan needed to keep the emotion out of her voice. "Nothing stuff. Everyone's stressed about school this year—you know that."

"Joan—"

"You don't have to keep asking, Dad. I'm really fine!" It came out frustrated. Joan pressed her lips shut. She didn't want to fight about it. She didn't want to tell Dad more lies than she already had.

In the silence, the wind rattled the windows. Dad's sigh was barely audible over it.

Joan looked past the kitchen's open-plan arch to the photos on the living room wall. Joan and Dad. Joan as a baby. Mum. The three of them together in a park, Mum and Dad holding Joan's hands. As a kid Joan had stared at those photos for hours, trying to match her own features to Mum's. Joan had always looked more like Dad than Mum. More Chinese than European.

"You remind me so much of her," Dad said. He'd followed her gaze. "More and more every day. She'd have been so proud of you."

That pressure of emotion again. There were things about

Mum that Joan *really* didn't want to think about. Mum had died when Joan was a baby. Her death had always been a fact—one that Joan had learned before anything else, before she'd learned to count or read. An immutable fact. A foundational fact of her life.

"Gran never talks about her," Joan pushed out. "Like never. Don't you think that's weird?"

Dad was silent, his eyes still on the photos. "I didn't understand that either for a long time," he said. "But . . . Your Gran and Mum didn't always get on. They had an argument just before your Mum died. I think your Gran felt very guilty about that. I think she blamed herself for your Mum's death in some strange way." He took off the oven mitts. Mum must have bought those ones. All the dark stuff in the house was hers; Dad preferred bright colors.

"I think this dinner is a big step for your Gran." Behind his glasses, Dad's eyes were wet.

He wanted to go to this dinner, Joan realized. He wanted to see the Hunts tomorrow. He wanted to remember Mum with Mum's family on this anniversary.

Joan took a deep breath. "We'll both go together?" she said. Dad would be at this dinner, she reminded herself. The Hunts wouldn't be able to talk about monster things in front of him.

"Of *course*," Dad said. "It's a family thing."

"A family thing," Joan echoed. Not a dinner with monsters, but a dinner with Mum's family and Dad. "Right," she said. "A family dinner." And after their dinner, Joan and Dad would go home to their normal lives. It wasn't like Joan would be pulled back into the monster world.