

ONLY A MONSTER

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VANESSA LEN


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First published in Great Britain in 2022 by Hodder & Stoughton
An Hachette UK company

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A CIP catalogue record for this title is available from the British Library

Hardback ISBN 978 1 529 38006 4

eBook ISBN 978 1 529 38007 1

Typeset in Palatino by Hewer Text UK Ltd, Edinburgh
Printed and bound in Great Britain by Clays Ltd, Elcograf S.p.A.

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50 Victoria Embankment
London EC4Y 0DZ

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Prologue

When Joan was six, she decided she was going to be Superman when she grew up. She told Dad she needed the costume so she could practice. Dad had never liked spending money, but he painted an S on Joan's blue T-shirt and found a red napkin she could use as a cape. Joan wore them to bed every night.

"Superman?" Gran scoffed when Joan came to stay with her in London that summer. "You're not a hero, Joan." She bent her gray head confidently. "You're a monster." She said *monster* like being a monster was as special as being an elf.

Gran was making up Joan's bed in the guest bedroom, and Joan was helping by stuffing the pillows into their cases. The room smelled like fresh laundry. Morning sun filled it to the corners.

"Monsters look like giant spiders," Joan said. "Or like robots." She'd seen enough cartoons to know. Gran sometimes told jokes without smiling. Maybe this was one of those times.

But Gran's eyes weren't shiny with a held-in joke. They were serious. "That's pretend monsters," she said. "Real monsters look like me and you."

Joan and Gran didn't actually look that much alike.

Joan took after Dad's side of the family—the Changs. Dad had moved to England from Malaysia when he was eighteen. He

had round, freckled cheeks and narrow eyes and smooth black hair like Joan's.

Gran looked like the photos of Mum. She had curly hair that hung around her head in a cloud, and green eyes that were too sharp for her face. Sometimes Joan saw that same suspicious expression on her own face in the mirror. *The Hunt family look*, Gran called it.

Gran finished smoothing the duvet and sat on the edge of Joan's bed. It put her and Joan at the same height.

"Monsters are the bad guys," Joan said skeptically. In cartoons, monsters lurked under your bed. They had scary laughs that went on too long. They *ate* people. At school Mrs. Ellery had told Joan that Chinese people ate cats. Joan had kind of felt like a bad guy then—but with the same bubble of resistance that she felt now. She wasn't. She *wasn't*.

For some reason, that made Gran smile. "You remind me of your mum sometimes."

Joan didn't know what that had to do with monsters. Still, she held her breath, hoping Gran would say more. Mum had died when Joan was a baby, and Gran hardly ever talked about her. At home, there were photos of Mum above the TV and on the living room wall. But Gran didn't have photos of anyone in her house. She had paintings of fields and old ruins.

"Dad said she was clever," Joan ventured.

"Very." Gran pushed Joan's hair back from her face. "And stubborn. She didn't believe things without proof either."

Before Joan could ask what that meant, Gran reached up into the air above them as if she were plucking an apple from a tree. The hairs on the back of Joan's neck rose, although she couldn't have said why.

When Gran opened her hand, she was holding something that gleamed gold like the morning sun. A coin, but not a coin that Joan had ever seen before. On one side, there was a winged lion; on the other, a crown.

"I know how you did that," Joan said. It was called *sleight of hand*. Joan's cousin Ruth had shown her how to do it with a button. You could make something appear and disappear by hiding it between your fingers and then flipping it into your palm.

Gran dropped the coin into Joan's hand. It was heavier than it looked. "Can you show me?" she said. "Can you make it disappear?"

Ruth's trick had been hard. Joan had only gotten it right twice, and she must have dropped the button a hundred times. Still, Gran's face was expectant, so Joan put the coin into the arch between her thumb and forefinger, balancing it.

"No," Gran said. "The way I did it." She moved the coin into the center of Joan's palm and closed Joan's fingers over it. "The monster way."

I'm not, Joan thought. *I'm not a bad guy*. And Gran wasn't either. Joan had spent almost every summer with Gran for as long as she could remember. When Joan had nightmares, Gran sat up with her. When Joan had found an injured bird in the park, Gran had wrapped it in her scarf and looked after it until it could fly again. A person like that wasn't a monster.

Joan concentrated on the weight of the coin until she couldn't feel it anymore. She opened her fingers, showing Gran her empty palm.

Gran's smile was warm. "The monster way," she said approvingly. She added: "There's a rule that goes with that trick."

"A rule?" Joan said. At home, with Dad, there were rules about what you should and shouldn't do. Stealing was wrong.

Helping people was right. Lying was wrong. Listening to the teacher at school was right.

The Hunts had rules too, but it was like they'd agreed to a whole different set of them. Stealing wasn't a big deal, and neither was lying—as long as you were doing it to strangers. Paying debts was right. Being loyal to your family was right.

"We hide in plain sight," Gran said. "Do you know what that means?"

Around them, the house seemed very quiet. Even the birds outside the window had stopped chirping. Joan shook her head.

The warmth was still there, but Gran's expression turned serious. "It means that no one can know what the Hunts are," she said. "What you are." She lowered her voice. "You must never tell anyone about monsters."