

PROLOGUE

It starts in a supermarket.

The boy is three years old, and trying to wriggle free of a shopping trolley's seat. His mum pushes him back down.

Sit still.

The boy ignores her, laughing as his dad walks away with exaggerated strides and flapping arms. He loves the chicken walk.

Hurry up. Just get the eggs! His mum snaps.

Okay. Take a chill pill. He winks at the boy as he turns into the next aisle.

His mum wheels them forward. She stacks tins into the trolley. She rubs her temples and scratches her arm. Cereal packets, a loaf of bread and bags of crisps follow the tins. She stops and the boy coughs as his chest bumps against the metal handle.

Mummy. Naughty!

She ignores him. Stares at her arm.

The boy is close to her. He can see goosebumps amidst slender golden hairs. She looks up, head flicking left and right.

No, no, no. She's muttering to herself.

The boy frowns.

Mummy?

She smiles at him, but there's something wrong with her smile. It's not natural. She steps away from the boy and peers around the end of the aisle. She glances back at him and then moves out of sight.

He sees it.

The *monster*.

Human shaped, but grey-skinned with withered limbs and an emaciated body. Rotten clothes hang from its scarecrow frame. Its eyes are the colour of blood.

The monster is following an old man. His trolley has a wonky wheel that keeps locking. The old man curses with wheezy breaths as it grates and judders. His face flushes with frustration and he rubs his chest above his heart. There's a curl of spittle on his chin. The monster circles him, facing down the aisle towards the boy.

Their eyes meet but don't lock. The monster's fixed on the old man. It twitches and moves its shocked gaze back to the boy. If the monster had eyebrows, it would have raised them. Instead, its bald forehead wrinkles and pus oozes from beneath a scab. The monster shuffles to the left. The boy tracks it with his gaze. He moves right. The boy's eyes never leave him. A look of manic glee creases the monster's face. It sniffs the air, then smiles, revealing brown teeth. It claps its hands like a child waiting to be handed a present.

It's you, hisses the monster, edging forward. *He was telling the truth. You can SEE me.*

It laughs and drops to all fours, scuttling towards Stan like a beetle.

Mum!

She's there in a second, skidding around the corner.

What?

'onster!

What?

'onster!

Where?

He points at the creature now hurtling down the aisle towards them. She scans the aisle. All she can see is the old man. She grabs the trolley and wrenches it through a semicircle as the monster launches itself towards the boy.

His dad is whistling and tossing a carton of eggs between his hands as he emerges into the aisle in front of them. He freezes when he sees the fear on his family's face.

The monster can't change course, it's in mid-air. It smashes into him, driving him into a tower of sweet corn tins. They crash to the floor; man and monster. Yellow tins roll in every direction. Somebody screams. Staff amble towards the incident.

The monster lands on his dad's chest and rolls off. His dad clutches his shirt above his heart, his fist scrunching fabric into a ball. Pain contorts his face. His teeth grind. His eyeballs are as white as a snooker cue ball.

The monster glances back and forth between man and the boy, his expression pure frustration. He reaches out to the man and his hands are holding a ball of light.

The boy's rising into the air, twisting around. He can't see what's happening. His mum has pulled him from the trolley, clutched him tight to her chest and they're running. Running the wrong way. Running away.

Daddy!

They bustle past protesting staff and burst into the warehouse. The woman skids to a halt, dodging a forklift truck, then weaves between thirty-foot high pallets of shrink-wrapped packets and tins.

Which way? Which Way? His mum panics at a junction.

Daddy!

She ignores him. She picks a direction and speeds up as they come to a huge doorway covered by heavy strips of plastic. Beyond is the blurred outline of the high street. They push through and sunlight blazes all around them.

They've found us. Oh dear God, they've found us, his mum says, as they run down the pavement. She flags down a bus and they jump aboard. Her hands are shaking. She spills coins on the floor as she pays. As they pull away the boy tugs at his mum's sleeve. She's looking backwards, out the rear window.

Daddy?

She can't say the words *he's gone*. Instead she asks the boy: *What did you see. Back there?*

'onster.

Her lips pinch to nothing. The bus turns a corner and accelerates in a cloud of fumes. She sits back in her seat, squeezes him tight and closes her eyes. Tears roll down her cheeks.

I saw an 'onster, mummy.