FURIOUS THING

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For my sister, Tina

A Tale of Love and Death

Once there was a girl who grew up wicked. She threw things and slammed things and swore. She was clumsy and rude and had no friends. Her teachers thought her half-witted. Her family despaired.

'Why can't you be well-behaved and calm like other girls?' they cried. 'Why are you so bloody difficult day after day?'

The girl didn't know the answer.

Her family tapped their feet and shook their heads disapprovingly, trying to work her out.

'I'll change,' the girl said. 'I'll be good from now on, I promise.'

She wanted it to be true.

She wanted her family to love her.

But fury sat in her belly like a vicious snake. And some promises are hard to keep.

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I ran into the garden to hide. I'd been there for over ten minutes and thought I was going to get away with it, when Mum came out of the flat and down the steps. I tried my best to be invisible, but when she walked across the lawn she saw me.

She said, 'Get down from the tree and come and apologize right now.'

'Is he angry?'

'We both are.'

'Is he going to ground me?'

'I don't know. But you can't speak to people like that and think nothing's going to happen.'

'I didn't mean to. The words just fell out.'

'Is that right?' She held out her hand to tick them off. 'You hope tonight's going to be a disaster. You hope the guests get food poisoning. You have no intention of coming to the party and we can all piss off. Those words just fell out of you, did they?'

I spread my fingers to touch a black-velvet leaf bud. If I was a leaf, nothing would be expected of me.

Mum said, 'Pretty hurtful, wouldn't you say?'

I peered down through the branches to look at her. She was wearing yoga pants and a T-shirt. She had an apron tied round her waist and her face was flushed. I melted looking at her. I'd promised to help get things ready and all I'd done was cause trouble. 'I'm sorry, Mum.'

She smiled wearily up at me. 'I know you're disappointed Kass isn't coming, but you can still have fun without him. Think of all the delicious food and how amazing the garden's going to look with the lights and everyone dancing.'

But the only person I wanted to dance with was Kass. I hadn't seen him since he went back to university after Christmas. That was sixty-five whole days ago.

Mum said, 'Come on – down you get. The sooner you apologize to John, the less painful it will be.'

I climbed down slowly. I hoped I looked graceful.

'I've had an idea about tonight,' she said when I finally stood next to her on the grass. 'I know you find social events hard and I'm sorry your brother can't be here.'

'He's not my brother.'

'You know what I mean. If Kass was here, you'd find everything easier. But he's not coming, so there we are. So, how about you hand canapés around at the beginning? What do you think? It'll give you the chance to socialize without pressure.'

I saw where this was going and felt a pinprick of panic. 'I can't speak to people.'

'Having a task might help.'

What would she do if I turned round and climbed the tree again? Would she grab my ankles? If I scrambled up quickly enough maybe she'd walk back across the lawn and tell John I'd disappeared? They'd have to celebrate their engagement without me. But as moments kept slipping by, it was obvious we weren't going in that direction. I shoved my hands in my pockets and waited.

'Lex?' she said, eventually.

'Surely, the whole point of a buffet is that people help themselves?'

'They help themselves to the main course, but it's usual to offer appetizers as guests arrive.'

'Please don't make me. Get Iris to do it instead.'

'Iris is a little young.' She linked her arm with mine and squeezed. 'This is a fresh start for us. I want you involved.'

She was excited. I could feel it through her fingers. She'd waited years for John's divorce to come through, and now she could finally be his wife she didn't need me messing things up.

'I'll collect empty glasses if you like. I'll look after coats.'

'That doesn't get you mingling, Lex.'

'Honestly, Mum, me walking about with trays of food is going to be a disaster. You know it is.'

'I don't know anything of the sort.'

I'd trip over. I'd spill stuff. I'd forget the names of the canapés. 'What's this?' people would ask, pointing at something on my tray, and they'd expect a sensible answer and I'd stand there mumbling rubbish and they'd look at me weirdly

and I'd get so mad I'd fling the tray on the grass and stomp off. John's glossy workmates would discover what he already knew – that I was an idiot with a terrible temper. Someone was bound to ask him, 'Is this girl anything to do with you?' And then there'd be that awful disappointed look on his face as he said, 'Alexandra is going to be my stepdaughter.'

Mum kissed the top of my head. I don't know why. Maybe she was wishing me luck or maybe she was letting me know that even though I was a nightmare, she still loved me.

I said, 'I'm angry with Kass.'

Mum nodded. 'I know.'

I'd texted him from my bedroom earlier: U AWAKE?

He took thirty-seven minutes to text back. AM NOW. STILL NOT CMING?

He said no. He said sorry and that he'd make it up to me. I wanted to ask how he planned on doing that, but I didn't. I switched my phone off instead.

Mum took my hand as we walked back to the flat. 'You'll get used to him being gone one day, Lex.'

She didn't get it at all.

I was eight when I first met Kass and he was nearly eleven. Mum was already pregnant with Iris, so making a new family was a fait accompli, which means you get no choice.

Kass was told to look after me in the garden while the adults talked. I decided to ignore him. I was eight and didn't need looking after. Also, it was *my* garden. I decided if I didn't speak to him or look at him that he'd go away. But he didn't. The first thing he did was sit on a step of the

fire escape and say, 'If there really was a fire, these stairs would be useless.' He pointed out that they led directly into a walled garden from which there was no escape and that once everyone from the flats had collected there, it would be hell – with bits of burning building falling on our heads and no way out. 'You should get a rope with knots in it,' he said, 'and tie it to your bed or the window frame and go out the front.'

I liked it that he could think about terrible things in such a calm way. I also liked it that he wanted to save me. In *Hansel and Gretel*, it was the girl who did the saving, but the other way around might be fun.

'My mum's going to go nuts when she knows I've been here,' he said next. He picked up a handful of gravel from the steps and threw each little stone one by one onto the grass. 'Your mum's the other woman. Did you know?'

I shook my head.

'That's why my mum's going to go nuts. She went ballistic when she found out. She thought my dad was busy at work, not going on dates.'

'He's been seeing my mum for ages,' I said.

'Exactly,' Kass said.

He told me his mum threw his dad out, but she let him back when he promised to change. He said his dad was great at apologies, but they were usually bullshit and he wished his parents would stop being morons.

'Then my mum found out about the baby.' He looked right at me and something sad in his eyes made my heart leap.

'What did she do?' I whispered.

'Yelled a lot. Chucked stuff. The funniest thing she threw was a cup of tea at my dad's head.'

He laughed, so I laughed too. 'Did it hit him?'

'He ducked, and it smashed on the wall, but he got soaked anyway.'

I kept looking in his eyes. 'What else did she throw?'

'The biggest thing was the TV, which she flung down the stairwell.'

We cracked up at that. I thought his mum must be very strong, but he told me it was a portable TV, so it wasn't that impressive. Also, that his mum wanted to get a new one anyway, so it wasn't much of a loss.

Kass said, 'My mum thinks my dad's got this amazing new life with a new place to live and a new woman and a ready-made daughter.'

'She knows about me?'

'Of course.'

The idea that the grown-ups had been talking about me, and a total stranger was jealous of my life, made me gloriously happy.

I showed Kass my special way of climbing the tree and which branch to use to drop down to the wall. He said I clearly already knew what to do if there was a fire and could've rescued myself all along. From the top branch, I showed him which flat was mine and we searched the windows looking for my mum or his dad, but the sun was glaring, so we just got bright reflections back. Then we looked at other people's windows to see if we could see anyone naked, but

we couldn't. We played silly games – the craziest curtains, the most things on a window ledge, the dirtiest glass, the ugliest plant. We agreed on loads. And we laughed a lot. I was ridiculously glad that I could make him laugh.

But nothing was as good as the moment when he asked about my dad.

'I never met him,' I said. 'He dumped my mum when she got pregnant with me.'

Until then, I hadn't felt the smallest bit pleased about never having known my dad. But saying it out loud was like giving Kass an important gift.

He whistled low and long. Then he took my hand and squeezed it.

'Adults really piss me off,' he said.

It was like we'd cut our fingers with knives and become bound.