

# FURIOUS THING

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## *Two*

INSIDE, THE APARTMENT WAS like a TV commercial—full of sunshine and cooking smells. Iris sat at the coffee table with her coloring things, John was in his chair with the Saturday newspapers spread across the carpet at his feet. I wondered if he was going to give me the silent treatment, but he looked up as I walked in. “Calmed down?”

“Sorry.”

“Is that it?”

“Sorry I said the things I did. I didn’t mean them. I hope your party is a huge success and I won’t lose my temper ever again.”

“Well, now you just sound sarcastic.”

He went back to his paper. I breathed easier.

Iris flicked me a smile. “Come and look at my picture.” She’d drawn a fairy-tale castle made of glass and mirrors, erupting into a blue sky. “It’s our new house,” she said. “The one Daddy’s going to build when we’re rich. This is a turret”—she pointed at the smallest tower—“and these are called crenellations.”

“Good girl,” John said. “You want me to teach you a bastion next?”

“No, thank you.” She sucked the end of her pen. “I’m going to do direction posters for the party now so everyone knows to come upstairs for the bathroom.”

I kissed the top of her head. She smelled of cookies. “That’s sounds like a lot of work.”

She nodded. “I have infinite patience.”

I often doubted we were related. Not just the amount of words she knew for a six-year-old, but how talented she was at everything. Also, she was insanely pretty. It was like she was from a different species. It was John and Mom’s genes mixed together. I was an ogre compared to the rest of them.

John flapped his paper. “Uninhibited,” he said. “Eight letters, second letter is *m*.”

I wished more than anything I knew. I wanted to stun him with sudden intelligence.

“I thought it might be *immoral*,” John said, “but that’s not enough letters.”

Was he really wanting help? I plonked myself on the sofa opposite him. “You want me to look it up on my phone?”

“No, because that would be cheating.” Definitely not wanting help. He tapped his pen on the paper. “You know tonight’s smart casual, right?”

I looked down at my jeans. They had a hole in one knee and mud round both hems. I’d been wearing them yesterday and had dragged them back on this morning.

“I’m planning on wearing a dress.”

“Great. Have I seen it?”

“It’s new. I’ll show you later. Mom’s got jobs for me first.”

I could hear her out in the kitchen clunking stuff around. John’s colleagues were used to catered parties, but John said he wanted theirs to be authentic, which meant everything home-made.

I slunk down into the sofa, suddenly full of dread. All those architects from John’s work would be smart and polished like him. I was going to spend the evening feeling like such a loser.

John folded his paper and picked up his cigarettes. “Iris, I’m going to smoke. Can you leave the room for ten minutes?”

“But I’m doing something.”

“Take a break and come back.” He smiled at her. “Bedroom or kitchen—your choice.”

She put down a felt-tip pen and picked up a new color. “I choose to stay.”

“No, sweetheart—I don’t want your lungs full of smoke and tar.”

She snapped the lid off the pen. “I don’t want your lungs full of that either.”

He laughed. “Come on, give me a break here.”

“Smoking’s very bad for you, Daddy.”

He held his hands up in surrender. “All right, you win. How about making me some tea instead?”

She frowned, suspicious. “So you can smoke when I’m gone?”

He wagged the cigarette at her. “I promise if you make some tea and bring me a slice of shortbread, I will never smoke this.”

She hopped off her chair and held out her hand. “Give it to me, then.” He passed it over and she patted his head. “Good boy.”

He was never obedient like that with me. I wish I could make him sit, lie down, beg, come to heel . . .

“So,” John said, and I realized too late that he’d sent Iris away on purpose. “I understand you pestered Kass about joining us tonight?”

My heart scudded. “He told you that?”

He pulled a fresh cigarette from the packet and lit it. “I believe you told your mother.”

I knew I was blushing. I sighed as if everything about Kass was boring and slid down the sofa some more. “I happened to text him. I happened to mention it.”

“And his answer was . . . ?”

“He’s still busy.” I checked out my nails.

“And that brought on your tantrum?” He leaned forward, smoke coiling between us. “We talked about this, didn’t we? I don’t want him thinking he has to rush down from Manchester at the drop of a hat.”

I checked my cuticles, the dry patch on my palm.

John said, “He’s got exams coming up. No one expected him to come tonight and now he feels guilty.”

“I wasn’t trying to make him feel guilty.”

He frowned. Beat, beat went our hearts.

“What were you trying to make him feel, Alexandra?”

If I had to sum up, I’d say: *a crushing desire to spend the rest of his life with me*. But I wasn’t going to admit that out loud. Not until I’d proved to John that I was good enough for his son.

“Give the boy a break,” John said.

“I thought you’d like him at your party.”

“He’ll be back after exams, OK?” He gave me a tight smile. “Although, if you keep hassling him, he might prefer to stay away.”

The furious thing inside me came roaring up, but I swallowed it. “I’m not hassling him. I’m communicating.”

“Well, communicate less.”

“Yes, John.” I used my robot voice.

“Now, about tonight. I don’t want any more outbursts, so best behavior—OK?”

“I’m going to help. I’m going to hand out hors d’oeuvres.”

“Seriously? Is that a good idea?”

“Don’t worry. I won’t drop anything.”

“How about you just keep your temper in check?” He tapped his cigarette on the edge of the ashtray. “Be polite, that’s all I ask—be nice to my friends and super nice to my boss.”

“Why? You after a raise?”

He laughed. “Think you can get that for me?”

There’s a valley in Norway where the sun hardly ever shines, and the people are shivering and gloomy for half the year. Then, one day, someone had the brilliant idea to put giant mirrors at the top of the mountain to reflect the sun down and they put benches around

the town square, so people could sit and lift their faces to the light. Living in the shade makes you afraid to dream of the sun and then, when you feel it at last, it's thrilling.

“Best behavior,” I said. “I promise. By the end of the night, you'll be proud to know me.”

He nodded, and for a moment he looked as if he believed it might be possible.



## *Three*

THE FIRST TIME I met John, I was seven and Mom had invited him round to the apartment. I was wearing my sequin dress and Mom was wearing her favorite skirt with the lace at the bottom and a new pink blouse that was see-through, but she said that didn't matter because she was wearing a fancy bra. She'd tidied up and vacuumed and sprayed air freshener. She'd bought a case of beer and put it in the fridge.

While we waited for him to arrive, we looked at the website for the architects' office where he worked. We pressed the button called About Us, and pictures of everyone who worked there appeared.

"That's him," Mom said. "Hasn't he got a lovely smile?"

There weren't any pictures of houses he'd built because he wasn't a partner, so we came off the projects page and looked at his photo again. Then Mom checked the time on her phone and went to the window to look out. "It probably looks different in daylight," she said. "All the other times, it's been dark when he's come here. I hope he hasn't walked straight past."

"All the other times?" I said.