

Deal Breaker Preview

Susie Tate

Chapter 1

The man hated me

Poppy

“HOW DO I LOOK?” I SPUN AROUND, MY SKIRT FLYING out around me in a shimmering mass of tulle and sequins.

“Like a sexy if slightly demented Tinkerbell,” Josh said, and I beamed at him.

“Nailed it! Exactly what I was going for.”

Josh rolled his eyes and smoothed down the front of his suit. There was nothing demented about Josh’s outfit. As always, he looked utterly perfect, not a stitch of Armani out of place.

“At least it’s better than Granny’s description,” I went on as I gave him a shoulder bump to ruffle his feathers. “I think it was ‘mad prostitute with a penchant for glitter.’”

Josh’s serious expression cracked then, and I even managed to score a chuckle to go with his eye roll.

If Josh had his way, we’d be arch-rivals. We both frequented the red carpet, stalking the same celebs. We were both considered to be firmly in the fluff category of journalists, interviewing actresses and pop stars rather than

politicians and world leaders. We both made people laugh, Josh with his desert-dry sense of humour and subtle but cutting put-downs, and me with my *obnoxiously bubbly personality*, as Josh would put it. But bitter rivalry just wasn't my vibe. Life was too short for that nonsense. And from the first eye roll I managed to eke out of him at the Cannes Film Festival five years ago (after irritating the shit out of him for the entire hour we'd had to wait on the carpet) I knew we'd be mates. He'd told me I was more persistent than impetigo and more annoying than a Powerpuff Girl. I was lucky that he settled on Powerpuff as my nickname and not Impetigo, to be honest.

I bit my lip. "Honestly, Grumpyface, do I look okay?"

Josh frowned. "What the fuck is this? Where's your misplaced, overblown confidence? Oh God, please don't tell me your celebrity is turning you into one of those oversensitive tosspots we interview? I enjoy insulting you, Powerpuff. Don't take away one of my few pleasures in life."

I forced a laugh. "Of course not, you twatwaffle." He turned to me then as his eyebrows went up.

"That was a *fake laugh*," he said in horror. "You never laugh like that. Where was the obnoxious snort? What the *hell* is going on?"

I shrugged and rolled my eyes. "Jesus Christ, can't a girl ask if she looks okay without making your head explode?"

"You know perfectly well that you look absolutely off the charts, mouth-wateringly gorgeous. If I were into vaginas, I would have already had my way with you behind the screens over there, so what's the problem?"

I looked down at my feet and bit my lip. "Do you think my shoes are ridiculous?" They'd seemed fun and sexy when I bought them, but since my mind had flashed to Rory's serious disapproving face, my confidence had

faltered. I doubted he would view my towering heels covered in sequined butterflies as anything other than totally insane.

“Oh. My. God. What on earth is going on? Where is my best friend? Who is this insecure weirdo who’s taken over her smoking hot little body?”

I forced another laugh, and his expression slipped into alarmed territory.

“Holy shit. What is *wrong*, Powerpuff?”

I shifted on my feet and tightened my grip on my microphone. “You remember I told you about Rory Wallace?”

“The hot rugby player who hates you because he’s an insecure manbaby?”

Ugh, I really wished I wasn’t such an oversharer. Josh was the least discreet man in England.

“Yeah, that’s the one. Well, he’ll be here tonight. They’re honouring him with a Contribution to Rugby Youth award.”

“You’re nervous because that twunt’s coming? Babe, forget about him. He’s the start of an angsty romance novel. Grumpy brother’s best friend who hates you for ‘*reasons*.’ He needs a kick in the balls, *not* you worrying if you look okay.”

I managed a small grin. “He’s not a twunt,” I muttered. “It’s not a capital offence to dislike me, you know.”

“Everybody loves you, Powerpuff,” Josh’s voice had gentled now. “Even *I* love you, and I’m a grumpy git who hates literally every other human being on the planet. He’s lucky I’ve softened the c-word with a *tw*. I reserve the right to change my mind if I observe any questionable behaviour.”

The first of the limos pulled up then, and Josh turned towards the road.

“Right, Powerpuff. Woman up. Tits out and let’s bloody well do this. You are Lady motherfucking Poppy Sterling. Some over-jacked rugger bugger’s not going to make you doubt yourself. Game face on now, okay? I don’t want to have to steal all your interviews from you again.”

“You never steal my interviews, you arrogant twunt.”

“Hey! No using my personal swears against me. Game time.”

The red carpet filled up surprisingly quickly. As this was the award ceremony for the UK Sporting Excellence Awards, most of the celebrities were sportsmen and women, so they were more nervous and way less camera-ready than our normal fare. But Josh and I were the type of extreme extroverts who thrived on winkling introverts from their little shells and sucking the banter right out of them. Sort of like the opposite of fun sponges. I guess we were like fun sprinklers or maybe even fun tsunamis; we just swept awkward, shy people right along with us for the ride.

“We must stop meeting like this,” I said to Alex Costas, the billionaire tech company owner who was sponsoring this entire event.

He grinned down at me. Alex and I had my standard red-carpet relationship – teasing, non-threatening flirting, with me making regular suggestions that he sweep me away to his billionaire batcave and him pretending that this was an imminent plan.

“It’s true. I’m stalking you. Feel free to report me to your union.”

“Ooh great idea! Hey, Grumpyface,” I poked Josh in the ribs, interrupting his interview with a football player who was definitely *not* of the shy variety.

“I’m in the middle of a conversation with this strapping young man, Powerpuff,” he said with fake annoyance. I

knew for a fact that he thought the particular football player he was talking to was an out-and-out c-word with no *tw* in the mix.

“What’s our union called?”

“How should I know? Useless, overpaid, overdressed fuckwits ’r us?”

I smiled. “Ah yes. That’s the one. You may go about your business.” I turned back to a smiling Alex. “You can expect a very severe reprimand, young man.”

“I shall look forward to it,” Alex said with a wink as his handlers moved him on.

“Bloody typical.” That low, deep, rumbling Scottish voice went right through me like it always did, and I turned to see Rory Wallace standing feet away from me and looking supremely uncomfortable in a tailored suit. Of course, with his massive frame, he’d *have* to have a suit tailored. There was no way he’d be able to buy anything off the rack that could cope with those shoulders and that musculature.

I searched my memories. Other than when he won the Rugby World Cup for Scotland five years ago, I hadn’t seen Rory in a suit before, and the one he wore back then had been an ill-fitting nightmare, nothing like the well-cut, expensive gloriousness he was wearing today, along with his scowl.

Rory Wallace did not like me. It didn’t matter how many smiles I directed his way, how many conversations I tried to start with him, or how many compliments I threw at him. He was the one human completely resistant to my charm.

My mind blanked as I stared at him, and for the first time in my life, I was lost for words – and I was *never* lost for words. Good God, the man was handsome. I hadn’t been

this close to him in years, and I'd forgotten the full force of his gloriousness. Gorgeous deep brown eyes, thick, close-cropped beard and even thicker dark hair. The scar marring one of his eyebrows only added to his perfection. Even five years after the furore of the World Cup victory, he was still widely considered the sexiest man in sport.

"What? Ye're no gonna do your fake flirting thing with me like you did with the jumped-up tech bro? Only reserve that bollocks for the billionaires?"

I swallowed and attempted a shaky smile. "Rory!" I exclaimed like he was one of my favourite people, and I didn't feel completely rattled as he stared down at me with that disapproving expression. I didn't cope well with disapproval. It made my stomach clench and threw me off balance. So off balance that one of my heels wobbled out from under me and I nearly fell. I would have done if his large hands hadn't shot out and enclosed my upper arms, keeping me on my feet.

"Christ, Poppy," he swore, letting me go as if I'd burnt him once he'd established I wasn't in danger of falling at his feet anymore. "Don't wear ridiculous shoes like that if you cannae walk in them. Ye're a goddamn liability."

I felt heat spread up from my neck to my face. Rory had the uniquely effective ability to make me feel small. It hadn't always been that way. As my brother's best friend, he'd known me since I was eight. And back then, he'd seemed to like me just fine. He'd always been a bit dour, but my antics made him smile, even laugh out loud, which my brother told me was super rare.

As a child, I idolised him, but as a teenager, I'd fancied him something rotten and been fairly obvious about it. Then, five years ago, I finally got my way, and even if it was only a kiss, it had been *glorious*. Rory Wallace was a

talented man on the rugby field but, if that kiss was anything to go by, he was gifted in other areas too.

Then came that bloody interview after Scotland won the World Cup, and everything blew up. Rory unceremoniously dumped me, and his entire attitude towards me flipped; no longer charmed by my eccentricity, but irritated. The man who'd patiently sat with me to help me revise for my A-levels, never once making me feel stupid for my crippling dyslexia, was now dismissive and cruel.

So yes, my favourite horror film is me declaring my undying love for Rory Wallace after he kissed me, agreeing to wait for him whilst he trained to represent his country and hiding the fact I was head over heels for him from my family on his instruction (this should have clued me in right there to be honest) only to have him ghost me after he won the match. *Ghost me*. It was humiliating, and I couldn't even complain to my family as they were totally in the dark about it all. My brother was still mates with the man.

"Thank you, Gok Wan, for that wonderful fashion advice," I said through a forced smile. "I shall look into flats for my next event, but I fear eye contact may be a problem with most people if I eschew the heels completely. How's the weather up there, by the way?"

Rory *didn't* crack a smile, forced or otherwise. I decided to soldier on. We were being filmed, and I had a job to do. Steve, my cameraman, gave me an encouraging pat on the back, and I straightened my spine. For some reason, Rory transferred his scowl to Steve after he laid his hand on me, and his expression darkened, which was impressive as I didn't think it could get any darker.

It seemed his hatred extended to my entire team. Good to know.

“So, Contribution to Rugby Youth Award, you talented man. Excited to be here?”

Rory grunted and pulled on his collar, clearly not comfortable in his formal wear. “Excited? To be in this monkey suit and have to talk to you lot? No likely.”

I flinched at those verbal blows. What was wrong with him? We were on the red carpet at an event which was supposed to be fun. It was in aid of the charity he supported. I was doing my bloody job. There was a camera pointed at him right now, recording an interview that I would no doubt have to dump.

Honestly, when would he let his resentment go? I didn’t even do anything wrong. And it was *him* who broke *my* heart. If anyone had the right to be a grumpy bitch in this situation, it was me.

“Right, Incredible Hulk,” snapped Josh as his latest interviewee moved on and he turned to Rory. “Off you fuck. Nobody but me speaks to Powerpuff like that.”

“Powerpuff?” Rory said in confusion, staring at Josh like he was a creature from outer space.

“You don’t deserve to breathe her air, big man,” Josh told him. “You should be begging to walk through hellfire to drink her bath water, not behaving like you’ve got a stick lodged up your arse. I may not be built like a brick shit-house, but I bitch-slapped my way out of a fight with a six-foot queen in a gay bar in Vauxhall yesterday, and queens in Vauxhall are *way* scarier than you could ever be. So off you go to hang out with your little rugby dickheads and leave *Lady Sterling* alone.”

Rory was staring at Josh throughout this little speech. At first, he’d bristled, especially when Josh had put his arm around me halfway through, but for some reason, at the mention of gay bars, his scowl softened and the corners of

his mouth turned up in something that may have almost passed for a smile.

“Okay, chief,” he said through his almost-smile, holding his hands up as he backed away. “Ye can stand down.”

“Stand down from what?” A tall brunette in a stunning floor-length black dress came up next to him and took his arm. My chest tightened. Her effortlessly understated style was the total opposite of mine: soft make-up, chic up-do, only a hint of cleavage showing – *nothing vulgar*, as Granny would say.

Now *my* girls were hard to miss, and I’d long since given up trying to minimise them. I was the Dolly Parton to her Princess Catherine. Don’t get me wrong, I *loved* Dolly, but after the withering looks from Rory, I was for once wishing I could manage a more regal vibe.

Still having a crush on Rory Wallace was ridiculous. The man hated me.

I shook my head to clear it and reached for my game face.

“Thanks, Josh,” I said through gritted teeth. “I’ve got it from here.”

Josh gave my shoulder a squeeze and Rory another scowl before moving to his own mark. Bless him. By leaping to my defence, he’d probably missed a couple of interviews already.

“Miss Hawthorne,” I put in, and when Rory’s plus one turned to me, I was proud that I managed a smile. It wasn’t her fault that she could channel royalty and bag a man that my demented brain fantasised about running off the rugby field covered in mud and shagging me before I gave him the chance to shower. That was *my* dysfunction. “You’re here to support Mr Wallace?”

"You don't have to answer her," Rory muttered to Maggie Hawthorne, who frowned at him.

"Why wouldn't I answer her?" she asked, seeming bewildered, then turned to me with a smile.

"Poppy Sterling," she gushed. "I watch your interviews."

"Oh dear. Bad luck," I said my standard reply with a mock grimace. Aside from interviewing celebs at red carpet events, I also booked them for one-on-one interviews which were conducted in one of the pods of the London Eye. It was perfect really, if a bit high pressure due to the thirty-minute time constraint. We called it *Pod Dates with Poppy* and posted the interviews on my YouTube channel. It was way more successful than I could ever have predicted, and over the last few years my Pod Dates had branched out from UK-based celebs to international stars. But however famous the celebs were, they all got the same pod and the same thirty minutes.

She laughed. "No! You're so funny and really insightful." She stepped closer then, ignoring Rory, who clearly wanted to move on. "I actually think you're terribly clever." She tilted her head to the side as she studied me. "The way you use humour to help people open up. And you make all of your subjects feel special. That's a real talent."

I blinked up at her, thrown for a moment, but as I always did, I recovered quickly. "Wow. Please don't tell me you're a beautiful, intelligent, famous political correspondent who's also really nice. Give us something to hate, for God's sake."

Maggie laughed. Even that was understated and beautiful. When I laughed, there was invariably actual snorting involved.

"Good luck tomorrow, by the way." The whole country

knew about Maggie's upcoming interview with the Prime Minister.

Maggie smiled. "Thanks. Maybe you should come along with me? I'd probably get a lot more out of him that way."

Rory grumbled something next to her, and she shot him an irritated look.

"Yes, yes, okay, Rory. I'm coming. Lovely to meet you, Poppy."

I breathed a sigh of relief as they moved on, but unfortunately, that relief was short-lived.

"Oh bugger," I murmured as I spotted Alastair Roxburg through the crowd, headed towards us. He was another Scottish rugby player, but the type of Scotsman who didn't have a broad accent like Rory. His family owned a castle near Edinburgh but spent most of their time in London. Alastair went to boarding school in England, and his accent was as posh as mine.

The Sterlings and the Roxburgs knew each other (just as most aristocratic families did in the UK) and attended a lot of the same events. Alastair had always given me a creepy vibe. He was objectively handsome, but quite frankly an arse. He made cruel jokes at other people's expense. He'd made my cousin Lola cry at her debutante ball after wondering out loud why they didn't "apply a weight limit to the posh birds they truss up in white for these things." And he was so arrogant that my repeated rejections over the years had gone down like a tonne of bricks each time, with him even asking me once how long I was going to be a "tedious cock tease" when I knew he was the most logical choice, seeing as he was in his own words, "practically Scottish royalty."

Unfortunately, as loathsome as he was, the man was talented on the rugby field and was part of the squad for the

Scottish team in the World Cup (although Alastair was actually on the bench as a sub for Rory's position). After my disastrous interview with Rory, Alastair had cornered me in the chaos and told me I was better off without "that low-life, Braveheart-wannabe peasant" and asked if I wanted to fuck him instead. I certainly did *not*, and I made that clear by kneeling him in the balls so that he would let go of my arms.

I'd managed to successfully avoid the man over the last five years, and I had no idea what he was doing here now. I doubted Alastair was in the running for any accolades unless there was a Biggest Bellend in Rugby award I didn't know about.

"Ah, my old friend, the lovely Poppy," Alastair drawled as he stopped in front of me, his gaze sweeping me from head to toe, making me feel a little bit sick.

I held back an eye roll and forced myself to smile as I looked up at his arrogant face.

"Mr Roxburg," I said through gritted teeth, holding my microphone so tightly that my knuckles turned white, and shuffling back as far as I could with the banners and Steve behind me.

"Mr Roxburg?" he said, his eyes wide with mock surprise. "Come on, Poppy darling. We've known each other since we were kids. Let's not dwell on formalities."

Before I could dodge away from him, he leaned right in, kissed my cheek and grabbed me around the waist so that my body was flush with his. Then, out of view of the passing celebrities and my cameraman, his other hand grabbed my arse.

I let out a muted scream and pulled away to take a couple of shaky steps back, running into Steve, who had to catch me before I stumbled.

Now, I was usually a fairly good advocate for myself,

but in that moment, I simply didn't know what to do. We were in the middle of the red carpet. Interviewing and flirting with celebrities was my career, and there were hundreds of people around us. I wasn't in any danger, but my heart was still hammering, and my face felt like it was on fire.

Alastair was smiling his shark's smile down at me as he tilted his head to the side.

"Oh, come on now, Poppy. We're all friends here, aren't we? I *know* how friendly you can be."

What was the slimy git talking about? I'd never even kissed him.

He chuckled and lifted a hand up towards my face. I flinched back from him, wobbling on my heels again. When I opened my mouth to call out to Steve, suddenly Alastair's hand was gone.

"What the fuck do you think you're doing, mate?" snapped Rory, who seemed to expend very little effort grabbing Alastair's arm and pulling him back several feet away from me.

Chapter 2

A blessing and a curse

Poppy

ALASTAIR'S SMILE DROPPED AS HE SHOOK OFF RORY'S hand and took a step back.

"I have no idea what you're implying," Alastair said, his voice ice cold. Rory raised both eyebrows as he towered over him, and it was Alastair's turn to flinch. He looked between Rory and me before forcing his faux charming laugh.

"Come on now. This is all just a misunderstanding. We can be gentlemen about this, can't we?"

"A gentleman does not grab a lady's arse without her consent, and he certainly doesn't scare her, Roxburg," Rory said, his tone now rough with anger.

"Poppy's not scared, are you, darling?" Alastair raised his eyebrows as he looked over at me.

I froze. I didn't know what to say or what to do. I felt shaky, upset, and too embarrassed to speak, which was extremely rare for me.

"Might I remind you, Wallace, of the very generous

donation I've made towards your charitable endeavours, and—"

"Yeah, you can sod off, mate." We all turned towards Connor Douglas, who had come to stand next to Rory and was looking at Alastair with the same contemptuous expression. "It's *my* charity, see. It's for *my* disease because I'm the one dying. You've made your donation, very publicly, I'll add; there's no clawing that back. Doesn't mean you can go around grabbing women. So fuck off, yeah?"

"Bloody ridiculous," muttered Alastair as he stalked away.

Rory glared at Alastair's retreating back, then transferred his angry glare to me.

"Th-thank you," I said softly, despite his furious expression. Even if he was a grumpy git, he still deserved to be thanked for getting slimy Alastair away from me. Rory cleared his throat and shifted uncomfortably on his feet.

"Are you... um, are you okay?" I think it might have been the first vaguely kind thing Rory had said to me in over five years.

"No, she's not okay, you knob," said Connor Douglas. "She just had that weasel's hand on her arse."

"She *what*?" Josh semi-shouted, and we all turned to him. "Did that blackguard touch your arse, Powerpuff?"

"Josh, calm down," I muttered.

"I will *not* calm down. How *dare* he?" He turned to Rory. "Isn't he one of your little rugby friends? What is wrong with you people?"

Rory grabbed the back of his neck in a gesture I recognised as a sign of his discomfort. "I played rugby with the bloke, but I wouldn't categorise him as a mate." He looked at me with a frown. "I thought *you* were friends with him though. I actually thought that..." He trailed off and looked

to the side, then back at me. "Aren't yer families close? All part of Posh Families 'R Us?"

"Just because my family knows the Roxburgs doesn't mean I like their son. He's always been a creepy sod even when we were younger." I shuddered at the memory.

Rory blinked at me, seeming stunned for a moment. "Are you serious?" he eventually asked. "Does Rafe know about this?"

I pulled my lips between my teeth and bit them as I shrugged.

"Honestly, Poppy. You need to—"

"Ugh, look, big guy. I've said thank you for getting rid of him, and I meant it. But don't tell me what I *need* to do. This is my job. Light-hearted banter and flirting are part of my job. Yes, okay, that walking red flag has taken it too far, but honestly, it's usually just worth putting up with stuff like that."

"You shouldn't be putting up with anything." Rory seemed beyond angry now.

"Exactly right, Mr Wallace," Josh put in. "For once, we are in agreement."

I cleared my throat and threw my head back, lifting the microphone up towards Connor. I was not going to let *any* man stop me from interviewing.

"Mr Douglas," I said in a bright tone. The hand that was holding the microphone was shaking slightly, but I was nothing if determined. "It's so wonderful to see you here with your beautiful wife."

"I like the sound of that," Mrs Douglas said as she came up to her husband's side, looping her arm through his. She was about my height, so for once I didn't have to tilt my head back to look at her. She leaned into her husband, and he smiled down at her with such love in his

expression that it made my throat feel tight. “Hi, I’m Mhairi.”

“Hi,” I said, my voice sounding a little choked, and then to my absolute horror, my eyes started to sting.

Oh God. Not now.

I’d always been susceptible to waterworks. The slightest thing could set me off. And seeing the obvious love between the Douglasses, and knowing about Connor’s recent diagnosis of Motor Neurone Disease, was tipping me over the edge.

Shit, I thought to myself. *Okay, think happy thoughts.* But my mind was working against me, and I’d been thrown off by the shock of Alastair grabbing me. Before I could stop myself, I was remembering the image I’d seen in the newspapers of the Douglas family at Connor’s last rugby game for his London club, the Ravens. Connor’s twelve-year-old son had been the mascot, and the whole family, including their three-year-old girl and six-year-old boy, had come out onto the pitch at the end to a standing ovation.

Christ, that was it. I was gone.

I started to cry.

“I’m so sorry,” I whispered, absolutely mortified by my behaviour. “I just... ugh! I’m such a dick.” I cleared my throat and swallowed. “I was just so sorry to hear about what you’re going through. I’m a pathetic loser crying like this.”

Then, to my complete shock, Mhairi surprised me and pulled me into a massive hug. I loved hugs, and after the last half hour I needed a hug, and clearly Mhairi gave bloody good ones. But I was aware that letting a woman with a terminally ill husband comfort me was relatively pathetic behaviour.

“It’s okay,” said Mhairi, her own eyes glassy as she

pulled back to look at my face, keeping her hands on my shoulders. "I cry all the time."

I sniffled. "You're allowed to cry. The last thing you need before you go into a high-profile awards evening is a complete twunt of an interviewer blubbing all over you."

"Twunt?" Mhairi asked with a twinkle in her eye.

"It fits," Josh put in from my side as he shoulder-bumped me gently. "But let the poor woman go, Powerpuff, or you'll be straying into out-and-out c-word territory."

"We'd better get going," said Connor softly, smiling down at me as he took his wife's hand. "It was lovely to meet you, Poppy."

"Are you going to be okay?" Mhairi said as she stared at me. Tears were still running down my face. Ugh. I was such a wet wipe.

"I'm good, honestly. Please ignore the waterworks. Have a wonderful evening." I looked between her and her husband. "Please, go forth and be with stoic people who aren't going to embarrass themselves. Forget about twunts like me."

"I'll find you later," Mhairi said softly.

"I'd like that," I said in a hoarse voice. "I'll get myself together. I promise."

I glanced at Rory. He was frowning at me, which was pretty standard, but there was something working behind his dark eyes that I didn't understand. This display was probably another black mark against me. Oh well, he couldn't very well have any lower opinion of me, could he?

Once they all walked away, I collapsed into Josh, thumping my head on his chest.

"Kill me now," I said into his waistcoat.

"Do not get any tears on my Armani," he muttered, but did wrap his arms around me.

"I just wept all over a woman I don't know, whose husband has a terminal illness. I have reached a new low."

"Yes, you are indeed a pathetic little Powerpuff."

I chuckled. "Thanks, Grumpyface. I can always rely on you to make me feel even worse."

He sighed. "You just feel things deeply. You're like an emotional sponge. It's a blessing and a curse."

"That was unforgivable."

"She didn't mind, darling," Josh said in a, surprisingly for him, gentle voice. "Sometimes someone sharing your pain, having that much empathy for what you're going through, sometimes that's soothing."

"God, Rory already thinks I'm a total muppet. He'll hate me even more now."

"Hmm."

"What does hmm mean?"

"It means that if Rory Wallace hates you so much, why did he look like he wanted to commit murder when he pulled over-sexed rugby bro off you?"

I shrugged. "He's still mates with my brother. It's probably big brother reflex kicking in. He knows Rafe would want him to step in."

Josh shivered. "Oh, your big brother could step in with me anytime. That man is delicious."

I laughed then as I pulled back from him to stand on my own. Josh might have his grumpy moments, but he had the uncanny ability to make me feel better. "You're not exactly his type I'm afraid, Joshy."

"A man can dream. Right, my darling, you look an absolute disaster. Mascara everywhere. Let's sort you out and get ready for the after-party. Forget about hunky rugby players with sticks up their arses and broody expressions for the moment."

Susie Tate

If only it were that easy.

Chapter 3

Anyone would stare

Rory

“RORY, ARE YOU QUITE ALRIGHT?” ASKED MAGGIE, NOT for the first time.

“I’m fine,” I muttered.

Maggie laughed. “Well, I know you’re not the most verbose man normally, but tonight you’ve been positively mute. And I hate to break it to you, but you’re staring... quite a bit.”

“Don’t know what you mean,” I said, tearing my eyes from the excessively sequined girl across the room to gaze instead at my pint.

Maggie sighed. “You’ve been staring at Poppy Sterling all evening.”

“I have not! It’s only because she makes such a bloody exhibit of herself. Anyone would stare. The girl is all over the place.”

“I think she’s rather fun,” Maggie said. “She actually got me involved in a conga earlier. I haven’t done a conga since I

was ten years old. You've got to admit the party would be a lot duller without her. I mean, look at her now."

I looked over and nearly dropped my pint when I saw what Poppy was currently attempting. She had managed to get Connor and a few of the other lads up onto their feet and appeared to be teaching them Irish dancing. None of them could do it. I mean, *Poppy* couldn't do it. She was dragging other people up onto the dance floor now, including Connor's wife and his kids. The kids in particular were shrieking and laughing. Soon most people were copying them, and the band were playing what sounded like Riverdance. Her blonde hair was everywhere, and she was a blur of pink and silver sparkles as she danced around and through all the other people. Connor was laughing now. Mhairi had taken his hand to dance next to him. She was laughing too, but I could see that her eyes were glazed with tears. I felt my own start to sting and I blinked rapidly to push them back. I hadn't seen Connor smile like that for a long while.

I cleared my throat. "Right. Well, I guess she's certainly... fun," I said grudgingly.

"I think she's lovely. What could you possibly have against her?"

"Don't you remember that bloody interview?"

Maggie frowned. "What are you talking about?"

"The interview after we won the World Cup. Well, I didn't realise it was a goddamn interview at the time, did I? Poppy cornered me when I was shitfaced, and back then I trusted her, so my guard was down."

"What did you say in the interview?"

I turned away from Maggie as my mind flashed back to the chaos of five years ago. The open-top bus crawling through streets packed with thousands of cheering Scots, all

desperate for a glimpse of us World Cup heroes. Three hours of champagne and whisky with confetti raining down around us, with each player taking turns to hold up the trophy. Finally making it to George's Square, where a stage had been set up. Seeing Poppy's blonde curls bouncing in the crowd beyond the barricade, then locking eyes with her as she beamed up at me with that wide, infectious smile. Rushing off the bus past our handlers and through the barrier to get to her. Not noticing the camera crew in the background until it was too late...

I looked away from Maggie and shrugged. "It doesn't matter now."

"What? You thought Lady Poppy Sterling would be interested in you, Wallace?" Alastair's words from back then in his obnoxiously posh voice filtered through my mind. "*She's an earl's daughter, you stupid sod.*"

And I *had* been stupid. In the back of my mind, I'd always suspected that her so-called crush on me was too good to be true. As if the beautiful, famous, aristocratic Lady Sterling would be genuinely interested in a grizzly, grumpy old bastard like me.

Okay, so maybe I'd been voted hottest UK sportsman of the year a time or two, but that didn't make up for my absolute lack of any class. The relentless bullying I'd been subjected to by kids at the posh school I attended on a rugby scholarship had given me a rip-roaring inferiority complex on that score.

It was bizarre enough that Poppy's brother wanted to be mates with me, and that was only because we were on the same rugby team at Edinburgh uni. But after a manic freshers' week when I'd saved Rafe Sterling from a group of over-enthusiastic bouncers intent on kicking the crap out of him when he was shitfaced, he informed me that he *liked the cut*

of my jib, whatever the fuck that meant, and pulled me firmly into the Sterling circle. And once you were in the Sterling circle, you were in, and got all the benefits: family parties, stays at the Manor house over the holidays, even specialist rugby coaches sponsored by the family.

But why would Poppy call Alastair a creepy git if any of what he'd implied about them back then was true? Even her own brother had seemed to think they were an item. It didn't make any sense.

"The World Cup was five years ago, Rory," Maggie said. "Surely you can't still be holding a grudge against the poor girl?"

"I hardly ever see Poppy, so it doesn't matter," I said dismissively. After I blocked her, I made a concerted effort to avoid going anywhere she might be. It didn't always work, but nowadays *she* tended to avoid *me* if she saw me anyway, which ironically only served to irritate me, even though it was what I actually wanted (or so I thought). "I have no interest in seeing her. I mean, look at her – she's totally out of her mind."

"Maybe you could do with someone who's a little bit out of their mind."

"What does that mean?"

"Rory, you take life too seriously."

I smiled at Maggie. "Is that a polite way to tell me I'm a boring bastard?"

She rolled her eyes. "You're not a boring bastard. You've got a dry sense of humour and you're anything but boring, but you *do* take life too seriously. You need someone light-hearted, someone who can make you laugh more."

"Maggie, I'm here with you."

"Yes, Rory, and you haven't looked at me once."

"I'm sorry, love," I said, feeling a heavy weight settle in my gut. "I've been a shitty date, haven't I?"

"Yes, very shitty," she said, still grinning, and I winced.

"Oh God, Rory. Even in this, you don't like being a failure. Lighten up. You don't fancy me – that's okay. Listen, I'm going to head off. I've got that interview tomorrow morning. I want to prep for it."

"Oh, okay. Right. I'll take you home."

"No, you won't. I've got a car coming for me. You're going to stay here and keep watching her."

I shook my head. "I'm nay—"

"Don't argue with me, Rory."

I shrugged. "Okay, fine. I'll stay. For Connor."

Her eyebrows went up. "Yes, yes. You stay for Connor," said Maggie dryly as she kissed me on the cheek.

She pulled back. I caught her hand and gave it a squeeze. "I really do think that you're bloody fantastic, you know that, Mags?"

Her eyes softened, and she smiled. "I know I am," she said. "I'm just not bloody fantastic for *you*. You deserve that, you know, Rory. You deserve to have something that you want. I know you don't think you do, but it's true."

She looked across the room again, and then back at me before she turned on her heel and left.

