

Law Maker Preview

Susie Tate

Chapter 1

It was a dick move

Clara

“HEY OZZIE,” I SAID SOFTLY AS I TOOK ONE OF THE tiny chairs at the timeout table.

Ozzie gave me one brief, furious look, then crossed his arms over his little seven-year-old chest and glared out of the window.

I sighed.

Since the beginning of the school year, Oscar Sterling had consistently been the most challenging child in the class. Today, he'd ripped pages out of his reading book and then thrown the book at Margot Harding. At a normal school with normal kids, maybe this wouldn't cause all-out panic, but I didn't work at a normal school. Molton Prep was one of the most exclusive prep schools in London. These were no run-of-the-mill seven-year-olds. Margot was the daughter of Oliver Harding, the Duke of Buckingham, and Oscar was Lord Sterling's son. Both of these men were utterly terrifying.

Luckily, being only a teaching assistant, I didn't have

much direct contact with parents. That had been one of the stipulations I made before accepting this job. It meant I took the lower-paid assistant role, rather than that of form tutor, but that suited me just fine. I was able to keep the lowest profile possible – something I always aspired to – and I didn't have to deal with any Dukes of this or Lords of that on a regular basis. Given my almost crippling shyness when it came to adults, coupled with my unusual... circumstances, which made anonymity of vital importance, even the school agreed that this was for the best.

Lily, the form tutor, was deep in conversation with a furious-looking Margot, whose tiny body was stiff with affronted rage, her small fists clenched at her sides. Lily gave me a very brief “oh shit” look before going back to placating the little girl. We had just over an hour to defuse this situation before parents started to arrive. My mind flashed to Ozzie's dad, and my breath caught in my throat. Lord Sterling was one of the most intimidating men I'd ever seen in my life. Tall, built, dark hair, eyes so blue they were almost otherworldly, deep commanding voice (no doubt inherited from centuries of his ancestors ruling over the lesser mortals of this country). He was super scary, completely fascinating and, given that he was a barrister of all things, about the last man *I* should be obsessing over.

Luckily, someone like him would never notice someone like me. And I should be grateful for that. Lord Rafe Sterling was one of the most renowned criminal barristers in the country, and apparently on course to be one of the youngest judges ever appointed in the UK. Clearly not satisfied with the vast Sterling wealth, he was chasing the ultimate promotion.

For me, contact with police, barristers and especially judges was extremely ill-advised given my background. Not

that I could have spoken to Lord Sterling anyway. Considering I could barely string two words together when talking to our very kind and motherly headmistress, I doubted a conversation with a man like Lord Sterling would be on the cards.

That didn't mean I couldn't watch him, though.

If there was one thing I was good at, it was watching. Silent observation had been a survival technique for me when I was growing up, and it still served me well. So, every Tuesday morning and afternoon, I would look out of the classroom window, making sure I was out of sight behind some questionable year 3 artwork, to see Lord Sterling drop Ozzie off at school and pick him up at the end of the day. Usually, he was in a three-piece suit. In the colder months, he wore a long, dark coat over his suit, which flew out behind him in the wind and made him look one hundred percent the aristocrat he was. This was one small highlight of my narrow life, one thing I let myself have just for me. I stored up those images of him and revisited them at night when I was alone.

Fantatising about the totally unobtainable Lord Sterling was the closest thing I'd had to a sex life in years.

In my fervent imagination, I wasn't mousy and short, I didn't have to wear glasses to see beyond my fingertips, and I wasn't in woolly jumpers and thick tights (all of which were either black or grey). No, I dressed in the kind of glamorous, attention-grabbing outfits I'd seen the women in his life wear when he took them out (I may have Googled the man a time or hundred).

"Ozzie, love," I said gently again, shifting closer to his stiff little body. "I can see you're having some big feelings. Maybe we could talk about them. You know it's not okay to

rip up books, and it's definitely *not* okay to throw them at other children."

"I hate books," he mumbled, still staring out of the window. "And I *hate* Margot."

"Hate's a very strong word, Ozzie. Margot's your friend. I think she'd be really sad if she thought you hated her."

Ozzie shifted on his chair and glanced over at Margot who was still talking to Lily. "She's a know-it-all teacher's pet."

My eyebrows went up at that. "Teacher's pet? Really, Ozzie?" I didn't argue with the know-it-all comment – that one was fairly accurate – but Margot Harding was anything but a teacher's pet. She was a great kid, but submitting to authority was *not* her strong suit. "Hun, she locked Mrs MacGraw in the supply cupboard when she was filling in for me last week."

The corner of Ozzie's mouth lifted in a small smile. "Yeah, that was funny."

I bit my lips to stop myself smiling too. In all honesty, it *was* funny. Mrs MacGraw was a stuck-up bitch. Still, Margot shouldn't have done it. I bumped Ozzie gently with my shoulder.

"Why don't you tell me what made you sad?"

He looked down at his lap and his shoulders slumped. When he spoke, his voice was only just above a whisper, and I had to strain to make out the words.

"I still can't read very good."

I swallowed past the lump in my throat. He sounded so completely defeated. His defiance from earlier evaporated, and insecurity took its place.

"Ozzie, we've talked about this, love," I said softly. "You find reading a little bit tricky, and I think that's because your

brain muddles the letters up a bit. But there are lots we're going to do to help. Are you finding the new books easier?"

I had started the assessments for dyslexia with Ozzie two weeks ago. Even this early, I could tell that he was profoundly affected, so I'd gone ahead and bought some resources. The books he was using now had dyslexia-friendly fonts with wider-spaced lines, and some, like the one he'd ripped the pages out of, had coloured paper instead of white, all of which might help Ozzie make better sense of the words.

"Margot asked why my paper was yellow," Ozzie mumbled. "She thinks I'm stupid."

"Did she say that?" I asked in surprise. Margot was a handful, but she wasn't a cruel child.

"No, I guess not," said Ozzie as he scuffed his shoe on the floor.

"Ozzie, do *you* think you're stupid?" I said in a quiet voice. He shrugged and my chest ached again. "Sweetie, we've gone over this as well. Having dyslexia doesn't mean you're stupid. It just means you've got a different type of brain. That can actually be helpful for some things. Some of the most successful people in the world have dyslexia. Thinking differently isn't always a bad thing. Do you think Einstein's stupid?"

Ozzie shrugged again and I decided to go for someone a little more modern. "How about Tom Cruise?"

That got his attention. His little body shifted so he was facing me a little more and he blinked up at me with the startling blue eyes he'd inherited from his father. "Tom Cruise has dyslexia?"

"Yes, and whatever anyone says about the man, nobody thinks he's stupid, do they?"

Ozzie considered this for a minute and then slowly shook his head.

"I happen to think that you're very clever, Ozzie," I told him. "All we have to do is help your brain out a bit with the muddling up the letters thing, and then there'll be nothing stopping you."

"I shouldn't have chucked the book at Margot's head."

"Do you think you should say sorry?"

Ozzie nodded. I looked up at Lily, who was still trying to placate an irate Margot, and gave her a quick nod. Lily smiled and spoke to Margot again, pointing over to where Ozzie and I were sitting. Then Margot marched over to us to stand in front of the desk, planting her feet wide and putting her hands on her hips. She looked like a seven-year-old unexploded bomb of attitude.

"Hey, Margot," I said, "Ozzie has something to say to you."

"Sorry," muttered Ozzie at his lap.

Margot tilted her head to the side. "I'm gonna need more than that, Oscar Sterling," she said with all the sass I had expected.

"I shouldn't've chucked a book at your head," he said a little more clearly, but still not giving her eye contact. "It was a dick move."

"Oscar!" I admonished. "That was a bad word. You know we can't use those words at school."

Okay, so it wasn't ideal that Oscar used the d-word, but at least now Margot was smiling.

"Yeah," she said. "It *was* a dick move."

"Margot!"

"Why'd you do it?" Margot asked, her attitude-laden pose from before relaxing somewhat.

"Dunno," muttered Ozzie.

“Yeah, you do,” she countered, scowling down at him.

“My brain works funny, and I was embarrassed,” Ozzie said eventually.

“Funny how?” Margot asked, her eyebrows going up and her head tilting to the side.

Ozzie scuffed the floor again with his shoe. “I get my letters mixed up.”

“Oh, you mean *dyslexia*,” Margot said, and Ozzie blinked at her in surprise.

“Er... yeah,” he said. “That’s it.”

“Well, what’s the big bloody deal?” Margot asked and I rolled my eyes again.

“Margot, I am sitting right here, love,” I told her. “If you could just *pretend* not to swear, that’d be great.”

She grinned at me. “Sorry. Mummy’s always telling me off. She blames Daddy.” She turned back to Ozzie. “Well, dyslexia’s not a big deal. My cousin’s got it, and she gets to go to her own special room for exams, which is way cooler than the exam room. She gets snacks and everything cause her exam is longer. Last time, she had a *whole packet* of Jaffa Cakes.”

“Snacks?” Ozzie asked, perking up significantly. “Hey, Miss Clara. You never mentioned the snacks!”

“Er... right, yes. Not always the first thing I think of to discuss.”

“Well, it should be,” Ozzie said in disbelief. “I love snacks. Especially Jaffa Cakes.”

I suppressed a smile again. “Right, I’ll lead with the snack info in future.”

Margot huffed. “Okay, Ozzie, you’re forgiven. I’ve taken you off my list.”

Before I could ask her any more about the ominous list, she turned to flounce away.

“Feeling better about it all now?” I asked Ozzie once Margot was out of hearing distance.

“Yeah,” he said, managing a small smile.

“Wanna play Awesome Alliterations?”

He perked up even more at that. Ozzie was responding really well to the games I’d started with him last week. The alliteration game helped dyslexics sort out letters and identify sounds. He was getting pretty good. I smiled at him and reached over to grab the stack of cards that we used for this game. Unfortunately, this caused my sleeve to ride up my arm.

“What’s that purple blob, Miss Clara?” Ozzie asked, and I quickly pulled my jumper back down over my wrist. I cleared my throat as I kept my eyes focused on the cards I was sorting out.

“Oh, it’s nothing, love,” I said with a shaky smile.

Ozzie narrowed his too-intelligent eyes at me. “It looked like a big bruise. I got one like that the other day cause that di—” I gave him a sharp look and he rolled his eyes, “that punk, Lucas kicked me in the shin at football. It really hurt.” He glanced around to check the coast was clear and lowered his voice. “I even cried it hurt so much, but I pretended that I got a fly in my eye. Daddy covered for me.”

“It’s okay to cry, love.”

Ozzie rolled his eyes. “Not on a football team, it’s not. Anyway, my bruise went that colour, but it wasn’t even half as bad. Did someone kick you too?”

I opened my mouth and shut it again, struggling to come up with an excuse. I was usually much more adept than this at excuses, to be honest, but having the question come from a child threw me somewhat. “I... fell.”

“You fell?”

“Yes, silly of me. I tripped and fell down some stairs. My arm took a big hit. But I’m okay.”

Ozzie was still staring at me. It was a little disconcerting. “Is that why you had a puffed up face at the start of term? Did you fall then too?”

“Um... yes. Yes, I... fell into a door then.”

“You must be super clumsy, Miss Clara,” Ozzie said. When I looked at him he was frowning up at me. That tightness in my chest was back again.

I forced a laugh. “Yes, I’ve always been a bit flibbertigibbet. They called me Clumsy Clara at school.” I lowered my voice then. “To be honest, I’m a bit embarrassed about it, so don’t tell anyone, okay?” I winked at him.

“Okay, Miss Clara,” he said slowly, and I quickly pulled out the Awesome Alliterations cards to distract him.

I knew you shouldn’t lie to children. And I knew you shouldn’t ask them to keep secrets. I *knew* that.

But some lies were necessary, and some secrets needed to be kept.

Chapter 2

Like a ghost

Rafe

“MISS SUMMERFIELD,” I CLIPPED, VERY CLOSE NOW TO losing my fucking patience. What was wrong with these people? Anyone with this level of incompetence would have been fired from my chambers immediately. “Unless your first name is *Clara*, I’m afraid you can’t help me.”

Miss Summerfield narrowed her eyes at me and stood her ground. I was mildly impressed. Most people did not stand their ground with me; quite the opposite.

“No, Lord Sterling, my first name is not Clara, it’s Lily. But I *am* your son’s form teacher and, as such, am perfectly capable of answering any questions you may have pertaining to his education here.”

I scowled at her and crossed my arms over my chest. I did not have time for this level of fuckwittery. “I need to speak to a *Miss Clara*,” I said through gritted teeth for what felt like the hundredth time that morning. Did this Clara woman have the plague or something? Why was it this hard to have a simple conversation with her?

“Miss Clara doesn’t deal with parents,” Miss Summerfield said, also for what felt like the hundredth time. “She’s only a teaching assistant.”

“Well, she’s the one my son has been talking about for the last month non-stop. And she’s the one who told my son his ‘brain works differently’ yesterday, so I would like to bloody well speak to her *now*.”

“Daddy, you can’t say swears here,” Ozzie said as he tugged on my trouser leg.

I uncrossed my arms to ruffle his hair as I smiled down at him. “Sorry, buddy. I’ll do better, okay?”

“Miss Clara’s super shy with big people,” Ozzie went on to say. “She only talks to Miss Lily. I don’t think she’ll wanna talk to you. Specially if you’re gonna use your *scary voice*.”

“I’m not using my scary voice,” I lied as I crouched down so I could be eye level with him. “All Daddy wants to do is speak to her, okay? I’m not going to scare her. She’s a grown adult and a teacher, Oz. She can handle talking to a parent.” Ozzie looked sceptical, and I began to wonder what the fuck was wrong with the mysterious Miss Clara.

“Hello, Lord Sterling.” I straightened up at the headmistress’s voice. Finally, someone who could make sense of this shitshow.

“Mrs Clayton,” I said brusquely, straightening to my full height and towering over both women.

“Lily,” Mrs Clayton said. “Why don’t you and Oscar go back to class? I’ll deal with Lord Sterling.”

Lily let out a relieved breath and smiled at Ozzie who took her hand.

“No more swears, Daddy,” Ozzie said over his shoulder as he was led away.

"Sure thing, Oz," I called after him. "I'll see you later, buddy. Have a good day."

The smile I'd worn for my son dropped as soon as they were out of sight, and I turned back to the headmistress.

"I'm not sure what sort of show you're running here, Mrs Clayton," I said stiffly. "But if I want to meet with my child's teacher, that request should be accommodated."

Mrs Clayton gave me a shrewd look. My *scary voice* certainly had very little effect on her. But then again, she'd been the headmistress of Molton Prep for twenty years, and before that she'd been *my* form teacher. Not much could scare Mrs Clayton.

"Rafe Sterling," she said in her very own scary voice, "don't you come in here and throw your weight around like I haven't seen you shove Blue Tac up your nose and cry after Molly Anderson pushed you into a puddle."

I felt heat creep up my neck. Bloody hell, she was like a damn elephant. I'd been a scrawny little shit at prep school. It was only after I hit puberty that I'd "hulked out", as my sister liked to put it. That bitch Molly Anderson had been twice my size back then. I shoved a hand through my hair and shifted on my feet just like I was a naughty nine-year-old again.

"Okay, fine, I'm sorry," I muttered, relaxing my stance as I looked toward Ozzie's classroom, then back at Mrs Clayton. "Listen, I'm not trying to throw my weight around. It's just that Oz has been talking non-stop about this *Miss Clara*. And I know she's the one assessing him for dyslexia. I have a right to speak to the person educating my son."

Mrs Clayton tilted her head to the side as she stared up at me. "Are you unhappy with her input?"

"Not exactly," I said carefully. "I mean, Oz definitely seems less frustrated now, but I need to know what's going

on. He talks about her all the time, and I'm not sure I agree with all this *brain working differently* chat."

"Oscar's brain *does* work differently, Rafe," Mrs Clayton said gently. "And Miss Clara is the very best at helping children with different needs. I won't have you coming in and bullying her."

My eyebrows went up. "Bullying her? I just want to speak to the woman. I'm not sure what the hell is going on here, but you can't hide employees away from parents who are paying exorbitant fees and, in the case of my family, making significant financial contributions to the school on a regular basis."

"Now see here, young man," Mrs Clayton said in her most stern tone, the same one she used when I painted Molly Anderson's ponytail blue, "*I know* you didn't just try to use your money to get your way. I know this because I expect better from an Old Moltonian."

"Yes, Mrs Clayton," I chanted like I was back in her office as a naughty kid.

She stared at me for a moment, then let out a sigh. "You're not going to let this go, are you, Rafe?"

I stood my ground and shook my head. No, I was not going to give up until I met the elusive Miss Clara. Where the fuck had they been hiding her? I hadn't come across her at any of the school parents' evenings or functions. She was like a ghost.

Mrs Clayton looked away from me for a moment and bit her lip in a highly unusual display of indecision and concern.

"Okay, I'll see if I can set it up."

I huffed out a frustrated breath. "Can't I just see the woman now, for God's sake?"

"Don't take the Lord's name in vain," Mrs Clayton said

distractedly. She still looked like she was struggling with something. Then she focused back on me and gave me a stern glare that would have had me shaking in my plimsolls thirty years ago. "If I agree to this, you've got to promise me not to be so... well... *you*."

"I beg your pardon?"

"Rafe, honestly, you know what I'm saying. You treat every situation and every person in it like you're in your courtroom. I'm immune as I've seen you wee yourself at the school nativity but..."

"That was Ollie Harding!" I snapped. Bloody Ollie. Twenty-seven years later and I was still taking the flak for his lack of bladder control.

"Goodness, it doesn't matter now, dear," Mrs C said in her patented placatory tone. Alright for her – *she* wasn't the one being reminded of shit that went down in prep school. "What I'm saying is that you're intimidating. This girl, Clara, she..." Mrs C trailed off and looked over my shoulder towards the classroom door, her expression troubled. "She's quiet."

"She seems to have plenty to say to my son."

"No, not with the children. She has a natural affinity with the children. It's adults Clara struggles with. Her employment agreement is clear on no contact with parents."

I thought back to all the various ways Ozzie had described Clara. Everything was "Miss Clara this" and "Miss Clara thinks that," "Miss Clara told this joke and I nearly peed myself laughing" – what kind of stunt was this woman trying to pull? Clearly, she just wanted to waltz off with her paycheck and not have to face any of the tricky aspects of teaching, like communicating effectively with the parents who were *providing* her damn paycheck.

It seemed as though she had Mrs Clayton and that form teacher wrapped around her little finger too. She must be some sort of master manipulator. Did I want another manipulative woman around my kid? I'd had enough of that with his mother.

"I'm sorry, but I insist she makes an exception for me," I said firmly. Mrs Clayton stared at me for a long moment and I decided to go in for the kill. "Of course, I could always take my concerns to the governors. Are they aware that there's a teacher at the school declining meetings with parents and only answerable to the pupils? Is that something they'd be happy with?"

Mrs Clayton's face reddened and she narrowed her eyes at me again. "You always were a stubborn little blighter," she said in a low voice, and I suppressed a smile. "Fine. I'll set it up. But I need a chance to talk to her first."

I felt a wave of frustration but tamped it down. I could wait a few more hours. Tuesdays were my day with Ozzie, the one day I never scheduled court. I took him to school and picked him up every week. On my other days with Oz, his nanny did the drop-offs. Officially, I only had fifty percent custody of Ozzie. Unofficially, his mother was always fucking off to Europe and the States, so despite her having made my life hell in the custody battle, she rarely made an effort to be in the country to spend the time with Ozzie that she had fought so hard for. I was determined to give him some stability and be the parent he could rely on. So Tuesdays with Ozzie were sacrosanct, even if it pissed the clerk at chambers off.

"I will arrive here thirty minutes prior to collection time today. I presume I can meet her then?"

Mrs Clayton sighed, that troubled look was back in her

Susie Tate

eyes again and for some reason I felt a twinge of unease. But no, I told myself. It is not unreasonable to want to meet the person my son talks about nonstop. She couldn't possibly be that pathologically shy, could she?