

Trouble Maker Preview

Susie Tate

Chapter 1

She's tolerable, I suppose

Lily

“SHE’S NOT NEARLY PRETTY ENOUGH TO TEMPT ME.”

I froze under the table. That arrogant, stick-up-his-arse Lord-of-the-Manor posh boy! Well, even if he was tempted (and by the way, who speaks like that — gross!) I wouldn’t touch him with a barge pole.

Okay, okay, maybe I was a lying little weasel. Because I had thought about touching Lord Stick-Up-His-Arse, hadn’t I? But who could blame me? The man had half the UK panting after him.

Hattie looked up from the cake we were sharing and raised one eyebrow with a small smirk on her face. I stuck my tongue out at her. Little brat. Mercifully, she didn’t break our cover, probably keen to hear what further insults Lord Knobend was going to come up with, and given that he was her uncle, she’d likely be even more invested.

Arrogant Twuntwaffle’s friend snorted. “Careful, mate,” he said in an amused voice. “Don’t let any of the Sterlings hear you slag off the little teacher. You know how

protective Rafe is of anything even vaguely to do with his missus.”

“I’m not about to piss off Rafe Sterling, you prick,” Lord Cockwomble said. “And I mean no disrespect to Miss Summerfield. She’s tolerable, I suppose, but not up to my standards. Besides, I overheard her banging on earlier about her desperation to find “the one” before, and I quote, her ovaries ‘shrivel up to the size of raisins’ and her lady parts ‘close over completely’. Bloody terrifying woman.”

Hattie was shaking with silent laughter now. I rolled my eyes and handed her a napkin before she choked on the bite of cake she’d just taken. It would serve her right to asphyxiate on baked goods whilst she laughed her arse off at her posh uncle putting me down.

But unfortunately, the little blighter’s laughter set me off too. Suppressing laughter was not one of my strengths. I put both hands over my mouth as my shoulders started shaking, but then a little snort escaped and we both froze.

“Did you hear that?” Lord Wankpuffin said.

Hattie and I stared at each other with wide eyes. I glanced to the side to see the large feet in polished leather shoes shift slightly. The situation was so ridiculous that I started shaking with laughter again, both hands clamped over my mouth and tears streaming down my face.

“Oh, there you are, darling!” the posh voice of Lord Big-Mouth’s mother, the Duchess of Suffolk, sounded from nearby, and the feet shifted again as he must have turned to look at her. I was feeling a little lightheaded now as I didn’t dare take in a breath for fear of another snort. “Why on earth are you hiding away over here? The Montagues want to discuss the Marlborough estate. Do come along and speak to them.”

Both men stood up from the table and left, and I

breathed a sigh of relief as the mother's voice became more distant, indicating they were moving away. After a full minute, I risked a small peek from out of the bottom of the tablecloth, and, other than the wedding guests milling around nearby, the coast was clear.

"Oh my God!" I breathed as I collapsed back on the floor behind me so that I was lying on my back, looking up at the underside of the table. "That was bloody close."

Hattie followed my lead and lay down next to me, still giggling. I gave her arm a light punch.

"Yeah, laugh it up, you little traitor."

"I'm sorry, Miss Lily, but you've gotta admit that was legit hilarious."

I grinned. "Well, I'm glad I spent the best part of the morning having my bloody make-up done only to be labelled as 'barely tolerable'." What would Lord Butthole think of me if he saw me as I was in the wild? He'd probably downgrade me from "barely tolerable" to "shit scary".

"I think you look really pretty," Hattie told me, reaching over to give my hand a squeeze.

Great. Now I was getting a pep talk from a ten-year-old — a new low.

I'd seen Hats disappear under the table about an hour ago whilst I was struggling not to yawn as some posho explained to Clara and me about the taxes on his country estate. Taxes. Ugh, bore off. So I slunk away and followed Hattie into her hiding place. Luckily, as the more resourceful of the two of us, Hattie had the foresight to bring cake.

Hattie had been one of my favourite pupils the year before last at the posh private school, Molton Prep, where I was a teacher. She'd struggled a bit at the start of the year with shyness, but I'd really managed to bring her out of

herself by the spring term and she was an enthusiastic cook in our end-of-year play, *Sweeney Todd* (not the most conventional choice for a Year Three play but there's nowt more bloodthirsty than a bunch of eight-year-olds).

We'd barely made it through the first slice of cake when Lord Feelings-Are-For-The-Poor and his mate decided to sit at the very table we were hiding beneath. Just my bloody luck.

"Why are we under a table anyway?" I asked Hattie as we continued to stare up at the wood surface above us. "Bit of a weird place to hang out."

Hattie snorted. "You can talk when it comes to weird, Miss Lily."

She had me there. I was not a conventional person. I thought it made me charming, but clearly others would class me as "barely tolerable". Well, there wasn't much I could do about my personality.

"I followed *you* under here, squirt," I reminded her.

"Well, I just wanted a break," muttered Hattie. "Mum's exhausting today."

I gave her hand a squeeze in return. Hattie's mum was an exacting woman. I would never say it out loud, but I agreed with Hats: she was exhausting. I'd had countless meetings with the woman over the year Hattie was in my class. She fell into the "posh and pushy" category as far as parental styles went.

"She's just a bit highly strung, love," I said gently. "She doesn't mean to be harsh."

"Lily?" We both turned towards Clara's voice to see she'd lifted the tablecloth up and was peering under it at us both. "Hattie? What are you two doing here?"

"Hey, Bridezilla!" I said to Clara, forcing a smile as I crawled out towards her, dragging a reluctant Hattie in my

wake. When we'd fully emerged, I snatched Clara into a fierce hug, and she gave a startled laugh.

"Hey, Miss Clara," Hattie said softly, back to full shy mode now that we were out in the open.

"Hey, love," Clara said as she gave Hattie a brief side hug. "You keeping Miss Lily out of trouble?"

Hattie shrugged. "I got a bit overwhelmed," she whispered.

"Ah, okay. Our secret then," Clara whispered back.

"Hattie?" I cringed at the sound of her mum's abrasive voice. Hattie's eyes went wide for a moment before she shot off in the other direction.

"You are having a good time, aren't you, Lils?" asked Clara.

"Of course I am, love," I said, forcing an even wider smile. I was not going to let some full-of-himself aristocrat ruin my night, and I certainly wasn't going to let it ruin Clara's wedding day. She was nervous enough as it was.

I didn't blame her. This shindig was enough to make even me nervous.

We had an actual rehearsal for the wedding last week. And not just your bog-standard run-through-your-lines-with-the-vicar job. Noooo. This was a full three-course dinner for the entire wedding party at a swanky restaurant where Gordon Ramsay himself came out to the table. That was where I'd formally met Lord Up-Himself, otherwise known as Lord Darcy Fitzwilliam, heir to the Dukedom of Suffolk, founder of one of the most successful hedge funds in London and one of Rafe Sterling's ushers.

I had never in my entire life seen a man as drop-dead gorgeous as Lord Fitzwilliam. Not in real life and not on telly either. Over six feet of pure sex appeal. Ice cold, yes, but honestly, with that jawline, those ridiculously green

eyes and that thick dark hair, the man could probably make a woman spontaneously ovulate with a quirk of his perfect eyebrows. It was just as well he never bloody smiled. God knows how the female contingent of the wedding party (and the one gay usher) would have coped with that level of hotness.

I'd actually found his grumpiness a bit of a turn-on up until I heard him call me "barely tolerable". Well, now he could sod off.

"I'm so proud of you, Clara," I told my friend with real feeling. Clara had been through a hell of a lot, and she hated being the centre of attention. This wedding was really the brainchild of her new sister-in-law, Lady Poppy Sterling. Poppy loved Clara, and she bloody loved a party, therefore lowkey was always going to be tricky. With pink flowers exploding from every available surface, champagne flowing freely and hundreds of guests, the event had been thoroughly Poppied.

I'd been worried how Clara would cope, but she was so in love with Rafe that I think she barely registered the massive fuss.

"Ladies."

The man himself drew up next to us and pulled Clara into his side before leaning down to kiss her temple. "All good?"

"All great, thanks boss," I told him. "I've had free champagne all night, and I've eaten my weight in cake. You give good wedding, my man."

He chuckled, and Clara leaned into him more as he gave her a squeeze.

And there it was. The reason that Clara didn't mind all manner of fuss-making. As long as she was with Rafe, every-

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thing was right in her world. A pang of jealousy shot through me.

Not pretty enough to tempt me.

Ugh, why was Lord Shit-Talker's voice stuck in my brain now? I shook my head to clear it just as the first line of "Where Is My Husband!" came through the speakers.

Hmm... I'd give Lord Bastard-Pants something to be terrified of.

Chapter 2

I did not yearn

Darcy

“THE MAID OF HONOUR IS A TOTAL NUTTER,” CAROLINE said with a sneer. “I have no idea how Rafe allowed it. Just look at her!”

I *was* looking at her. Christ, I hadn’t been able to take my eyes off her since she threw herself onto the dance floor.

It wasn’t that her dancing was sexy. To be honest, I had zero frame of reference to categorise that type of dancing — I’d never seen an adult woman move like that before in my life.

The song playing was enquiring after the whereabouts of a husband, and Lily was belting out the words as she threw her arms wide, sometimes spinning in circles, at one point going back to back with Poppy Sterling and swaying together as they both went down to their knees until they ultimately collapsed in a heap, squealing with laughter.

Then she started some sort of coordinated dance with the kids, including Margot Harding, my niece, Hattie, and Ozzie Sterling. It was clearly a dance that they had all

performed before, maybe from the much-talked-about *Sweeney Todd* performance that Lily directed over a year ago. What sane teacher would put on a play about a murderous barber who sliced up his clients so they could be made into pies to sell to the general populace? Caroline's assessment wasn't far from the mark.

Lily caught my eye then, and a mischievous grin lit her face. Leaving the kids still dancing, she slid across the floor to me.

Yes, she slid.

The woman, who had long since shed her shoes, did a running start into a full slide across the polished floor, coming to an abrupt stop inches from me. She was still belting out the words to the song as she grabbed my tie, pulled my face to within a hair's breadth of hers, so close I could smell that soft floral scent that had plagued me as I walked with her down the aisle earlier today and as we'd posed for the interminable wedding photos.

She went up on her tiptoes, moving even closer, and I was completely spellbound. I knew I was an intimidating man. It kept most people away, which in general suited me just fine. As a socially awkward bugger, I preferred it that way. But this woman showed absolutely zero fear or deference towards me. I honestly couldn't remember the last time that had happened.

And I was going to kiss her. Right here in front of the entirety of London high society, I was going to kiss this completely inappropriate spectacle of a woman.

But just as our lips were about to connect, she reached up and, I kid you not, tweaked my nose, then threw my tie up into my face before spinning around and sliding back to the kids.

"What just happened?" Caroline asked in a high, tight

voice as I stared after Lily who was still flouncing about on the dance floor.

I realised I was still leaning slightly forward as I had been when I'd thought Lily was going to kiss me. My brain felt fuzzy, like I was struggling for a coherent thought, which was completely out of character for me.

"Darcy? Are you quite alright?" Caroline was staring at me now.

I cleared my throat as I straightened up and adjusted my tie. "I'm fine, Caro."

"Someone should have a word with that Summerfield woman," Caroline said, still in that stiff voice. "Her behaviour is completely inappropriate. What on earth is she doing now?"

"I believe that's a rather good forward roll," her brother, Charlie, put in.

Poppy had moved to haul Lily up to her feet, and the two of them were laughing together as they both moved over to Clara, pulling her away from her new husband and into a group hug-slash-dance, which had Clara laughing as well. But then the three of them broke apart and started dragging more and more people into their circle.

"Come on, mate," Charlie said, bumping me with his shoulder. "Let's get in there."

"I have no intention of 'getting in there'," I told him. No way was I risking any more close contact with that woman. I had the wildest idea that, given too much exposure to her, I would simply crack, drag her to me and kiss the stuffing out of her. I could actually picture me doing it. Me, Darcy Fitzwilliam, grabbing a woman like Lily Summerfield and kissing her. It was ludicrous.

"Quite right," said Caroline. "The last thing we all need

is to make total prats out of ourselves. Some of us do have some self-control."

Charlie sighed. "God, Caro, you can be such a bloody bore. Well, you two can stand about here and sneer all you want. I'm going to have a laugh."

The circle had spread out wider now, and Poppy Sterling had shoved her fiancé, Rory, an ex-international rugby player and arguably a grumpier sod than even me, into the centre. He rolled his eyes and pulled Poppy in with him before spinning her round, dipping her nearly to the ground and kissing her. When they straightened up, Poppy tried to carry on dancing with him, but he'd clearly reached the end of his tolerance, so he simply plucked her up over his shoulder and carried her to the outskirts of the circle like a sack of potatoes.

The kids were next in the circle. I noticed Hattie was reluctant to go in, but Lily crouched down next to her and whispered something in her ear, which seemed to give my niece the confidence she needed. My chest tightened as I watched Hattie sidle into the circle. Margot Harding immediately grabbed her and spun her in circles, melting Hattie's self-conscious expression as she started laughing.

I could have done with a few more Margot Hardings in my early childhood. Hattie and I were quite similar in that regard, socially awkward and shy but often seeming icy and standoffish. I was sent to boarding school at age seven, where I was not a popular kid. That was when I learned to rely on myself exclusively. Other than Charlie, that is. He'd always seen straight through my awkwardness to the lonely chap I was at heart. I'd been the Dobermann to his Golden Retriever ever since we were toddlers. There was nothing I wouldn't do for Charles Bartley, even put up with his sister who had a mean streak a mile wide.

The kids had started some sort of breakdancing contest, except none of them could actually breakdance. Margot and Ozzie dragged Lily into the centre again and she dropped to her arse and spun on the spot, ending up lying on one side with her head in one hand and her other hand on her hip. It was the least skilled bit of breakdancing I had ever witnessed in my life, but with her cheeks stained pink from the effort, her eyes bright with tears of laughter and her pink bridesmaid dress rucking up so far it was practically indecent, I suddenly had the most powerful burst of longing shoot through me, making it difficult for a moment to take my next breath.

I didn't allow myself to need many things in life. I was all about control, about discipline. I'd been almost clinical in my approach to my relationships with women in the past. An acceptable prospect would make herself available to me. I would display the appropriate level of interest. We would do the accepted things — dinner dates at Michelin-starred restaurants, trips to art exhibitions, shooting weekends in the country. I would fuck her in ways I had perfected over the years for maximal female enjoyment. And so far, the relationships had dissolved with minimal fuss and by mutual agreement... Well, they would have little choice but to agree with my terminating the association. I will admit that my last girlfriend did call me an "ice-cold fucking bastard of the highest order", but she was of the more volatile persuasion.

I did not yearn. I did not allow myself to feel this level of desire. It was totally foreign to me.

But as I watched Lily Summerfield rolling around in the middle of that dance floor, I realised I would do just about anything to have her smile at me and feel her lips on mine.