

Outlier

Susie Tate

Chapter 1

Six minutes and forty-five seconds

VICKY

I glanced at the large digital clock next to my front door and frowned. He was three minutes and forty-eight seconds late. Maybe he wasn't coming? I shook my head in short jerks—that was an illogical assumption. Of course he was coming. The man needed to make money – I'd looked into his company accounts and verified that this was the case – and I was paying him *a lot* of money.

The fact that he still did his own deliveries made absolutely no sense. This was something he needed to contract out. His time would be much better spent creating the beautiful furniture he made.

My mind flashed to the glimpse I'd had of him in his workshop a couple of months ago, and my mouth went dry.

I'd been with Lucy, Lottie and Hayley in Little Buckingham looking for a small, runaway pony (a bizarre but actually not uncommon occurrence in Little Buckingham). Lucy had thought that Legolas might have made a beeline for her brother's workshop to "piss him right off". The pony wasn't

there, but Mike was, and as always, he looked incredible. His flannel shirt was wrapped around his waist, and he had a tight thermal covering his upper body as he sanded down a large table, his muscles rippling under the material with each pass. He'd smiled at Lucy, Lottie and Hayley, but also as always, when he looked at me, his smile dropped. Mike didn't really like me. To be honest, not a lot of people did. But I was hoping maybe I could change that. Lucy and Lottie had bolstered my confidence enough over the last few months to start believing it was possible at least.

When I brought my hand up to smooth my hair, I noticed it was shaking. I clenched my jaw in frustration. I could not have a meltdown. Not now. Not with him four minutes and twenty-two seconds late.

So I did the breathing exercises Abdul had taught me and balled my hands into fists to stop the tremors. When I shifted on my feet, I felt my muscles protest. I'd been standing in this same spot facing my front door for the last forty-nine minutes, so still and tense, that now, everything had stiffened. I was aware that standing still in one's corridor for nearly an hour, staring at a door, was not normal behaviour, but normal behaviour was not exactly my forte.

When I became hyperfocused on something, my quirks slipped into downright weird territory. And it was fair to say that when it came to Mike, I was *extremely* hyperfocused. I was almost more obsessed with Mike Mayweather than I was with hedgehogs.

Almost.

The problem was that the more hyperfocused I became, the more my behaviour deteriorated into the less-than-normal zone. I did not want Mike to think I was less than normal when he already didn't like me.

My throat tightened as I went over one of the causes for his

aversion to me. My memory can be very useful. I can recall events, conversations, and everything I've ever read or seen with perfect clarity. Academically, this is a huge advantage. However, when you've done something so awful and incorrect that you'd rather forget it completely, the ability to replay it entirely, down to the tiniest detail is not useful; it's a curse.

I could still picture Lucy Mayweather's face the day we threw all those awful accusations at her and then threw *her* out of the office. I could also picture the surveillance footage we recovered of Lucy being assaulted only seconds before. My brain tended to dwell on upsetting things despite how illogical that might be. As a consequence, I'd replayed Will Brent throwing Lucy against the office wall, and her head bouncing against the plaster too many times to count.

So no, Mike did not like me, not after that. When he'd later stormed into the office, stomping through the carefully controlled environment in his steel-capped work boots, all six-foot-four inches of him vibrating with fury over what we'd allowed to happen to Lucy, I'd never seen anything as magnificent in my entire life. I thought I was defective in that area. Well, I was defective in a lot of areas, truth be told, but with men, particularly so.

Until I saw Mike Mayweather that day, I couldn't imagine ever voluntarily letting someone put their mouth on mine, let alone all the *other stuff*. But when it came to Mike, all I could think about was what his lips would feel like, whether his beard was scratchy or soft, and how his large body would feel on top of mine.

After years of believing that I was dead when it came to attraction, my attraction to Mike had become all I could think about. Hence, my standing stock still in the corridor, staring at my front door.

For fifty-two minutes.

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I closed my eyes to focus on my breathing again, but they snapped open when the door suddenly shook with two loud pounding knocks. Without thinking, I instantly pulled it open to stare at a huge, flannel-covered chest.

He was right there. So close, I could smell him.

Now, I was very sensitive to scent in general and quite intolerant of most, especially when related to other human beings. But Mike's clean, woody, manly scent was so good, it made me feel light-headed for a moment. That, combined with the outline of his muscular chest in another tight thermal under said flannel shirt, worked together to short-circuit my brain. All I could do was stare at his chest. Which was weird, and I so, so wanted *not* to be weird in front of this man.

He cleared his throat, and my gaze shot from his chest to his angry brown eyes with their thick eyelashes. The eyelashes were incongruous with the rest of his extremely rugged appearance—thick beard, which was in no way sculpted like the other men of my acquaintance, messy brown hair a few days past needing a cut, tanned skin weathered from all the time he spent outdoors.

I'd never seen anything so beautiful.

"You going to stand there staring at me all day, princess?" he asked in his growly voice. He didn't say *princess* in a nice way, but he did at least leave off the "ice" part.

I hated that nickname. *Ice princess*. I knew what it implied—that I was stuck-up, aloof, and I thought I was better than everyone else. I knew that was Mike's opinion of me too. But this encounter was supposed to change all that. I was wearing actual jeans, for God's sake. Granted, Lottie had had to trial dozens of pairs for me until she found one soft enough for me to tolerate, and even then, I was still really uncomfortable and desperate to be back in my fleece-lined tights, or even better,

my buttery soft leggings. But the idea of these jeans was to make me look normal.

In fact, my entire carefully crafted appearance was trying to achieve that aim, from my “messy bun” which had taken me the best part of an hour and involved processing no fewer than five hours of YouTube videos, to my “natural look” make-up, to the relaxed cream jumper, which was just on the wrong side of itchy – itchiness was a real problem for me but I decided that if I could put up with the jeans, then I could tolerate the jumper as well. I’d even debated whether I needed to wear sexy underwear. There was no way I would have been able to tolerate lace or any underwiring, but I could maybe, *maybe* have dealt with satin if push came to shove. Instead, I decided to stay with my normal seamless cotton super-soft bra and knickers for now.

I didn’t think Mike would accept my proposal initially. He’d likely have a period of consideration, and I could then work up to tolerating uncomfortable underwear so that I’d be ready to wear it at a predetermined place and time.

“You’re six minutes and forty-five seconds late.”

Yes, that is what I said to him. I am a socially incompetent person, but that was bad, even for me. The trouble was I had a terrible habit of stating facts as they popped into my head. And in my experience, people didn’t want to have the unabridged truth foisted on them regularly. It was just one of the various ways I lacked social skills. I did not have the ability to lie, not even white lies.

Now, if everyone functioned like me, that would be fine. With white lies and half-truths eliminated, we could all live in honest harmony, being completely straight with each other at all times, and not taking offence to other people simply stating facts.

But the world was not full of Vicky’s. We were a rarity. And we were considered rude.

Mike crossed his impressive arms over his chest, his muscles bunching under his shirt as he did it, and his expression darkened.

“Christ, can we just get this over with then?” he snapped. “I wouldn’t want to waste any more of your precious seconds than strictly necessary.”

I stared up at him and blinked. “I have cleared my entire day for this delivery,” I said, yet again, blindly stating the truth without thinking through the consequences.

His eyebrows shot up. “For fuck’s sake, why?”

I opened my mouth to speak but then closed it again, just catching myself in time before I could blurt out that I’d spent the entire morning making myself look “normal,” and that I was hoping he would be willing to negotiate terms with me this afternoon.

“You say the f-word a lot.” This observation is what popped out of my mouth instead, and from his eye roll, it wasn’t a lot better than the other options. It’s not that I minded swearing; I didn’t. But for me, it was too difficult a minefield to negotiate. If you incorporated swear words into your regular vocabulary, you had to have the social awareness and emotional intelligence to know when it was appropriate and when it was not. I had neither social awareness nor emotional intelligence, so I chose to simply avoid swearing altogether.

“Sorry if I’ve offended your delicate sensibilities, Lady Harding. But if we could move this along, my swears uncouth carcass will be out of your hair a lot sooner.”

He said *Lady Harding* the same way he’d said princess—with undisguised contempt. I wasn’t sure if it was just contempt for me or for the peerage system as a whole. I mean, he was friends with my half-brother Ollie, who was the Duke of Buckingham, so I doubted it was only the peerage he objected to. No, Mike Mayweather simply didn’t like me.

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I doubt he remembered, but he'd never liked me. It had been obvious even on the handful of occasions I was around him as a child. And, back then I had been far less objectionable. I didn't go around stating obvious truths as a child. In fact, I did not speak at all. It was one of the many ways in which I was a disappointment to my mother.

After I stopped speaking, she decided she'd had enough of my constant silent presence in her new family and started dropping me off at my biological father's house for part of the summer holidays.

The trouble with that was that my biological father, the previous Duke of Buckingham, wasn't that keen on me either—and he also wasn't home a lot. This meant that I became his wife Margot's problem, which seemed supremely unfair, seeing as I was the product of the affair Margot's husband had while still married to her. But she couldn't very well put a six-year-old child out on the street, so I was welcomed, however grudgingly, into the family home for a maximum of two weeks every summer.

The first time I saw Mike Mayweather was at Buckingham Manor, and he was carrying a hedgehog in his bare hands.

"Sorry, Lady Harding," he'd muttered to my stepmother, when blood dripped from his hands onto her rug. "It's just, I found it out in the daytime, and that can mean it's sick." The sight of that large, rough boy gently cradling a tiny creature and not caring that the spikes were ripping his hands to shreds has stayed imprinted on my brain ever since.

The handful of times I followed Ollie to the Mayweather cottage, Mike scowled at me from across the small kitchen, clearly unhappy that I was invading his space. Mike's mum was an extremely kind woman and didn't seem to mind that I didn't talk, or that I only ate the tops of the Jaffa Cakes and would

only drink tea out of one specific mug. She also gave the type of hugs I could tolerate—brief, tight side hugs.

I really, *really* liked Hetty Mayweather.

Despite Mike's obvious dislike of me, even back then, he still fascinated me. And unfortunately, I hadn't fully mastered my habit of staring at things I found fascinating as a child. In fact, I hadn't really been able to mask at all—my only saving grace being the mutism.

"I'm not a Lady," I told Mike as he continued to stare down at me.

He shook his head once. "What are you—?"

"I'm not Lady Harding," I explained. "My father didn't pass his title onto me because I'm illegitimate."

His scowl dropped slightly, and he shifted on his feet. "Oh," he said as his arms uncrossed, before he reached back to grip the back of his neck, revealing that glorious chest even more, as his flannel shirt pulled to the side. He cleared his throat. "Right, sorry, love. Didn't think."

At the use of the word love, my gaze shot from its fixation on his chest, to his eyes. There was a softness about them now as he looked down at me, which hadn't been there before. That, combined with his use of an actual endearment, short-circuited my brain again. I could feel my pulse beating in my ears as a wave of light-headedness swept through me. Seconds ticked by until eventually, Mike had enough.

"Okay, if you could move back a little, then I'll..."

It happened when he put his large hands on my shoulders in order to manoeuvre me out of the doorway, as I'd clearly lost the ability to do this myself. He didn't grab me; his touch was gentle, and there was nothing threatening about it. But I wasn't prepared. I *have* to be prepared when people touch me. So, despite how much I'd been dreaming about Mike putting his

hands on me, when it actually happened, I yelped and wrenched away from him.

My hands went up, and it took all of my effort and training to stop them from flapping and pressing onto my ears. When I finally got my breathing under control and was sure I wasn't going into a meltdown, I looked up at Mike to see he'd backed away from me with his hands up, a horrified expression on his face.

I swallowed and tried to speak, but as was often the case when I was stressed, no words would actually make it past my tight throat.

"Bloody hell," he snapped. His horror now bleeding into anger. "Chill the fuck out. I wasn't going to attack you. You're the last woman I'd—" He broke off then, but I knew what he was going to say.

I desperately wanted to explain my reaction to him, but aside from the fact I physically couldn't speak at that moment, even if I could, what would I have told him? That I wanted him to touch me more than I've ever wanted anything in my life, but that I needed warning because I was so unbelievably weird? The whole point of today was to try to convince him I *wasn't* weird so he'd agree to my terms. Admitting to all my ridiculously complicated quirks would hardly be working towards that aim.

Chapter 2

Empty inside

MIKE

“Look, *Miss Harding*,” I said through gritted teeth. “If you wouldn’t mind standing back from the doorway, then I can actually do what I came here to do and then get gone and leave you in peace.”

There it was—that beautiful, blank stare again. I tamped down my irritation and decided to just get the fuck on with it whether she was cooperating or not. Once I’d delivered the bloody coffee table, I could bugger off and hopefully go back to avoiding Victoria Harding again.

I turned away from her, jogged down the stone steps of her fancy bloody townhouse, and picked up the bespoke coffee table that I’d poured countless hours into building, then shaping, sanding and varnishing, only to have it wasted on this ice-cold woman.

“I can help you carry it.”

I looked back up the steps at her standing in the doorway. What a bloody waste. The woman was absolutely stunning.

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Her beauty was almost otherworldly. And today, wearing those fitted jeans with her hair not in its usual severe, scraped-back style, the blonde tendrils framing her face, and her tiny bare feet visible with perfect bright pink nails, she was a knockout.

But it was still a waste because the woman's personality was, well, non-existent. Her nickname was dead-on accurate; she was the absolute *definition* of an ice princess. Not my style at all.

Unfortunately, for whatever fucked-up reason, she had gotten it into her head that I *was* her style. Even that day when I'd stormed into Felix's office to bollock them all for what they'd done to my sister, even then, distracted as I was by my anger, I'd noticed her staring at me. Christ, the woman could stare. It was seriously creepy if you asked me.

At least, that's what I told myself.

And I could just about manage it if I forced my brain to forget the dreams of her that plagued me at night.

In my dreams, she was anything but cold.

"She's just a little fixated on you."

Lucy's explanation floated back to me. Er, okay. I'm not the kind of guy you develop a fixation with. I'm not like Felix or Ollie—sophisticated, three-piece-suit-wearing pretty boys. I'm rough and ready, with an overgrown beard and questionable dress sense.

Girls like Vicky fixated on men like me for one thing—they wanted a walk on the wild side with a bit of rough. *That's* why she was fixated on me. And now she'd ordered one of my favourite pieces simply to mess with me. There was no way I could have anyone else deliver this, not after I'd spent hours and hours perfecting it. Even if it was going to an automaton who wouldn't appreciate art if it slapped her in the face, I still didn't want it to be damaged.

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“No offence,” I shouted back up to her, well aware that I was fully intending to cause offence. “But you’d be about as much help as a chocolate teapot. This table would crush you. I’ll carry it in if you could do me a favour and move out of the bloody way.”

Thankfully she did move back in time for me to make it into her fancy fucking house, but then gave no further indication of where she wanted the table to go.

Now, this thing was solid; all my pieces were solid and bloody heavy. It was uncomfortable to stand in the middle of someone’s hallway, holding one up in the air, not knowing where to set it down. But this goddamn ice princess just carried on staring at me.

I opened my mouth to say something, then snapped it shut as I noticed the little cracks in the icy persona showing through. Her pupils dilated, and very briefly, she bit her full, pink bottom lip as her eyes traced the muscles bunched and straining on my chest and arms as I kept this bloody table suspended in midair.

“Eyes up here, princess,” I said, my voice rougher than it should be, but who could blame me? She was a beautiful woman, and she was blatantly checking me out. And the memories of Dream Vicky were increasingly tricky to suppress.

Immediately, her eyes snapped to mine, and then another more human sign peeped through as pink stained her cheeks.

“If you’re quite finished, do you think you could tell me where this is going to go?”

She cleared her throat. “Oh, you can put it down here.”

I frowned. “You’re going to have a massive bloody coffee table sitting in the middle of your hallway?”

She shrugged. “I hadn’t really thought where it would go.”

I grunted with the effort of holding up the table, shifting it

slightly in my arms. “I’m no expert on interior design, but most people have coffee tables in their sitting rooms.”

“I already have a coffee table in there.”

“Right.” I drew the word out. We weren’t getting anywhere here, and I needed to set this thing down. “So why the fuck did you order another one?”

“I wanted to see you.”

Bloody hell, she was bold. No pretence. No trying to make any excuses. Just a straight out, fucked-up admission. I had to admire the woman’s balls, at least.

Seeing as we were going to get nowhere with the entire *where’s the table going* debate, and given I couldn’t think straight whilst my arms were screaming at me, I decided to put it down between us. Then I shook out my arms and cracked my neck before focusing back on the small woman in front of me.

She was still staring, but closer up, her expression didn’t look so blank anymore. No, closer up, I could see all sorts of things working behind her crystal blue eyes, and I could feel the intensity of her focus.

The coffee table was separating us, but I was near enough to make out just a hint of her lavender scent, not overpowering like some perfumes, but very subtle, and for some reason, it made the hairs on the back of my neck stand up.

“Let me get this straight,” I said slowly. “You ordered a two-thousand-pound coffee table just so that you could see *me*?”

“I also admired the table, very much. But yes, my main motivation was to have a private discussion with you.”

My eyebrows shot up. “What the fuck have you got to talk to *me* about in a *private discussion*?”

She bit her lip again, and I had the sudden and unexpected urge to reach over and pull her bottom lip free of her teeth. What the hell was wrong with me?

“I find you extremely attractive.”

There it was again—absolutely no filter on this woman. She didn't say it in a low, breathy, needy voice. She stated it as an absolute, with no distinguishable emotion behind the statement at all. Almost as though she were approaching some sort of business transaction, which pissed me off when all I could think about was dragging her onto the stupid bloody table I'd made for her and stripping her out of her jeans.

"This has not gone unnoticed, princess," I said in a low voice. Her cheeks stained even pinker at that, and I had to clench my hands into fists to stop myself from reaching for her. "But, for the love of God, why does that mean you order furniture you don't need?"

"My attempts to approach you have so far been unsuccessful," she said, still in that odd business-like tone. "This appeared to be the most expedient option."

My eyebrows went up. "Ordering a fucking expensive one-of-a-kind coffee table was the only way you could think of to talk to me?"

"Yes." She gave a firm nod. "Especially given that we are never alone, and we have never had a direct conversation before. My half-brother is extremely protective. He does not really approve of my... fixation with you."

I smirked at that. "I bet he doesn't. Not surprised he doesn't approve of the likes of me."

"The likes of you?" she asked.

I chuckled.

"Princess, I'm about as rough as they come. There's no way the Duke of Fuckingham would want me anywhere *near* his sister."

"Half-sister."

I shrugged. What was with all the half-sister, half-brother bollocks? Who cared? Clearly Ollie didn't see her as any less

than a sister. It seemed cold. But then, this chick's personality was positively Arctic.

"Okay," I said, losing patience with this entire aggravating conversation. "Here I am then. What did you want to say to me?"

She cleared her throat and then swallowed before speaking again. The only indication that she was nervous was the slight shake to her hand as she pushed her hair behind her ear.

"C-can we sit down? Maybe you could come to the kitchen? I could make you a cup of tea as per social protocol."

As per social protocol? What the hell was wrong with her?

"Just spit it out, princess," I said. "I've had a long day, and you're not my only delivery."

"Oh." She stared at me again, and I didn't bother suppressing my sigh. "Okay. Well, as I was saying—I find you very attractive, and as such, I was wondering if you might be open to... to progressing things on a physical level and—"

"Is that a fancy way of saying you want to fuck me?"

Vicky blinked. It was the only indication that what I said got to her at all. "Well, yes that would be part of the—"

I felt my temper spike. I'd always had a bit of a temper, and if I was honest, a slight chip on my shoulder about people born with silver spoons in their mouths. This woman thought that because she could probably buy and sell me and my entire family, that gave her leave to do and say whatever she wanted. Rich people were entitled: she found me attractive, so she felt entitled to snap her fingers and bang me.

"Let me get this straight," I said through gritted teeth. "You get me here on false pretences when you don't even *need* a goddamn coffee table. Then you proceed to make some sort of fucked-up pass at me because you're bored with your rich pretty boys, and you fancy a bit of rough?"

Her eyes went wide, and I was gratified that I was cracking that icy persona and extracting even more of a reaction.

“N-no,” she said.

I would never have called her tone hesitant, but compared to the way she spoke before, I could just about make out that quality.

“You misunderstand me. It’s actually quite common when someone like you interacts with someone like me. You see I—”

“Someone like me?” I said in a low, furious voice. “What the fuck is that supposed to mean?”

“W-well you and I, we’re very different, and it might be hard for you to fully understand what I—”

“Just because I do a manual job does not mean that I’m stupid, princess.”

“Of course not. If you would just listen, you would understand—”

“I understand perfectly. You want some fun with a bit of rough, and I’m not interested.”

“But... but you *are* interested in me physically.”

Oh, wow. This bitch certainly had a high opinion of herself.

I crossed my arms over my chest. “Is that right?”

She blinked at me. “Yes, the evidence would point to the fact that you find me physically attractive.”

“Evidence?” How had she gathered any evidence? I’d barely ever spoken to the woman.

“Yes. When I was at the pool in Little Buckingham in a bikini, you spent a large percentage of your time looking at me, and you had to use one of Margot’s outdoor throw cushions to cover your groin area after I got out of the pool.”

It was my turn to blink at her now. Words stuck in my throat as a vision of Vicky in that barely there bikini floated through my mind. I was ashamed to say that Vicky emerging

from the pool, soaking wet in that bikini, had been my go-to when I was on my own late at night, for quite some time. And it annoyed me. It annoyed me even more that she had noticed.

I felt my face heat up and thanked God for my thick beard. It was rare that I got embarrassed, but this woman had managed it. And, fuck my life, she wasn't even finished.

"Your gaze will often shift to me in a group. Your pupils dilate when I look at you directly. And you have been observed 'staring at my arse,' as Lottie put it, which I understand is a sure-fire way of distinguishing sexual interest. Also, I'm aware that I am, in general, physically attractive to men. I have been aware of this fact since I went through puberty at around fourteen years old."

"Wow, you've got a pretty high opinion of yourself."

She frowned. "On the contrary, I don't—"

"Well, I've got news for you, princess," I said, my tone now full of the anger she'd stirred up for being so beautiful but so unbelievably cold.

Anger at all the bloody rich people I'd known who thought they could walk all over me and treat me like shit. But most of all, anger at the promise of her being nothing but a lie.

"I wouldn't touch you with a barge pole. You're beautiful, and yes, maybe my body *did* react when I saw you half-naked, but just because I had a physiological response to you doesn't mean I would be tempted to ever touch you. I like my women warm, cute, kind, able to express actual emotion and equipped with a personality. You... you're like a beautiful vase—great to look at but empty inside. I'm not so hard up that I'd fall into bed with someone like you just because you made my dick hard once when you wore a bikini. So you can stop with this bullshit staring at me all the time. Stop fantasising about roughing it and go back to the pretty boys you *should* be fucking."

Nothing about her expression changed as I spoke to her.

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Not one flicker of emotion. So maybe I *had* let my anger get the best of me, but it wasn't like anything I said affected her. I slapped the delivery receipt down on the coffee table, which she did react to with a brief flinch.

"It's been real, princess," I muttered as I turned and stalked out of her house.

I didn't look back, but I should have.

I should have bloody well looked back.