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**Opening Extract from...**

# **All That Mullarkey**

Written by Sue Moorcroft

Published by Choc Lit

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*All That Mullarkey*

Sue Moorcroft



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First published 2010 by Choc Lit Limited  
Penrose House, Crawley Drive, Camberley, Surrey GU15 2AB

[www.choclitpublishing.co.uk](http://www.choclitpublishing.co.uk)

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A CIP catalogue record for this book is available  
from the British Library

Print ISBN 978-1-906931-24-7

PDF ISBN-978-1-906931-04-9

## *Prologue*

Gav's key in the door. Cleo's heart skittered uneasily but she lifted her chin. All she had to do was tell him that she was going to the reunion.

All day she'd considered retreat; the easy option. The reunion would be full of her uni classmates of a decade ago, flashing their kids' photos, looking blank when she'd none to show in return, and babbling about the careers that their business studies degrees had earned them. She'd come home thinking, 'So what?' And Gav really, really didn't want her to go.

So why was she going?

Because Gav had told her she mustn't.

Now he stepped through the sitting-room door, tie untied and hanging, curls ruffled, jacket over his arm. Halted to take in her new jeans, shiny blue top and make-up, then slammed the door shut. 'So you're going to this piss-up, then? Even though you know how I feel about you hanging around with your ex?' He threw down his briefcase, yanked off his tie and flung it behind him.

Cleo kept her voice calm. 'You know I don't do as I'm told, Gav. Anyway, I'm not "hanging around with my ex" – I'm going to my course reunion. I'll have a few drinks with a few old mates, then come home.' She slipped into her jacket, flipping her hair clear of her collar. 'I don't know why you're so angry. Yes, I went out with someone on the same course and he might be there. Am I planning to jump his bones the instant we're in the same room? No. If you choose not to believe me –' She shrugged. 'It's you that's got the problem.'

A sudden crash made her jump. Before she could properly

take in the mark on the wall where Gav had kicked his briefcase against it, he was bawling in her face, eyes bulging. ‘And I’m just supposed to sit home whilst you go out with your old boyfriend, am I? While you piss me about and make me look stupid?’

Furious colour scalded Cleo’s cheeks but she stood her ground. ‘I’ve never pissed you about! But if you don’t trust me –!’

Gav’s normally tidy hair hung into his eyes, sweat shone on his face. ‘It simply isn’t on!’ he roared. ‘You’re supposed to be my wife!’

In her outrage, Cleo could hardly breathe. ‘It was all over two years before I met you, just like it was all over between you and Stacey. You know that!’ He didn’t like talking about Stacey. Cleo knew how hurt he’d been when Stacey had ended things.

‘I just don’t want you to go!’

Cleo actually stamped in frustration. ‘This stupid lack of trust is hardly any thanks for five years’ loyalty, is it? Don’t try to control me, because you can’t!’ Several heartbeats passed before she added, coldly, deliberately, ‘And you never will.’

Gav halted. He gripped the back of the sofa, breathing hard, his face creased in disgust, as if he’d examined an apple and found a worm in it. ‘Fuck you. If you go to the reunion, I won’t be here when you come back. There will be no marriage.’

Fury blocked Cleo’s throat. Black then red flickered across her vision and she trembled from her knees up. Over the clamour of her heart she forced out words to hang in the air between them. ‘If that’s how you feel, it’s worthless anyway.’

Outside, her car key shook so much in her hand that it took three attempts to get it into the ignition. She ripped away from

the kerb without looking, driving at a stupid speed out of the village, not noticing the ponies in the field or the nicest gardens or any of the things that made her love Middledip. She flew through Bettsbrough and into the traffic circulating Peterborough to find the big pub at Wansford, the venue for the reunion.

Half an hour later, her breathing had slowed. Reason prevailed. She slowed the car, indicated right at a roundabout and turned back.

However much she was not in the wrong, she felt sick to think of the way they'd screamed at each other. They'd suddenly found themselves careering down a slippery slope and she had to find a foothold. The sensible way would be to show Gav that their relationship was more important than some stupid reunion – even a stupid reunion she had every right to attend.

She'd sort things out. Discover why Gav was acting as if he were possessed by the insecurity demon.

They'd make up in bed. She presumed so, anyway. They'd never quarrelled like this.

Outside the house she drew up and saw that Gav's silver Focus was gone.

The front door was wide open. Cleo ran upstairs ... Gav's wardrobes and drawers stood open and ransacked.

And then. A moment of utter stillness and dislocation from the world, of horrified incomprehension, as she saw the message written large in thick, black marker pen on the bedroom wallpaper.

*THIS MARRIAGE IS OVER. Love Gav.*

# Chapter One

Cleo's eyes burned with the effort of trying to pierce the ultraviolet glare of a nightclub that heaved with partying Friday-nighters, as she willed her sister's blonde head to bob into view. Liza had said she'd be here at Muggie's tonight.

Cleo needed Liza's sisterly arms around her, needed to rain foul insults on her absent husband (safe in the knowledge that, if Cleo forgave Gav, Liza would forget every word). And, as the bass and drums music thumped, Cleo had already texted her four times, without reply.

With a squeak of relief she glimpsed two golden heads and began wriggling her way towards them. 'Angie! Rochelle!' she gasped. Not Liza, but close. Angie and Rochelle, Liza's cronies and clones – hair up in a series of complicated plaits, necklines low and hems high – swung around and gave Cleo air-kissy little hugs. 'Cleo! *Hiya!*'

'Where's Liza?'

Angie, a starlet in scarlet, pouted heavily glossed lips as she raised her voice above the music. 'She's supposed to be here but we haven't seen her. Have you tried texting her? What you having?'

Cleo paused. She hadn't bothered with the bar yet but, actually, a drink would be perfect. Until Liza showed, Cleo could drink with Angie and Rochelle in this, the city centre's pick-up joint, simply because she knew how much Gav would hate it. If he was going to insult her with accusations of bad behaviour, she might as well behave badly. Alcohol would be a good starting point. She turned to the red leather and chrome bar and surveyed the bottles in the cold cabinet behind the scurrying black-clad bar staff. 'Lager, thanks.'

The pint of special brew Angie passed back to her wasn't quite the bottle of Becks she'd had in mind, but the big, fat, frosty glass felt satisfying. Gav hated her drinking pints.

She checked her mobile but found no texts and no voice messages. Aggravated that Gav wasn't even trying to get her – so that she could ignore him – she drank the pint down steadily and took her turn to buy a round, making her own another pint of special. Gav's giant strop had made her feel unsafe, unstable, as if she could combust at any moment. Fury clanked around inside her head. She needed Liza.

She kept one eye on the iron staircase that brought punters up into the club from the street below, hovering beside Angie and Rochelle as they quartered the room with beady eyes and heads on springs. 'There's Duncan, look, with Daniel. And Ross!' They waved across the room at men Cleo couldn't identify in the crowd.

Cleo couldn't even raise a smile, wishing deeply, dreadfully, that Liza would appear so that she could share her festering fury before she ripped someone's head off. She heaved a sigh.

'What's up wiv you?' Angie had recently affected an inability to pronounce certain words containing 'th'. 'You look like you're, like, spitting fevers.'

'Nothing,' Cleo muttered. 'I just want to talk to Liza.'

Angie exchanged glances with Rochelle before asking, slyly, 'Your Gav not wiv you tonight?'

She shook her head, blinking back tears.

'Ah. Right.' Angie nodded, sagely.

Rochelle, eyes outlined startlingly in aquamarine, patted Cleo's arm. 'It'll be all right when you go home! He's probably waiting to make up.'

Cleo felt her eyes begin to melt. 'But he stormed off –'

Angie's attention was suddenly whipped away. 'Who's *that*?'



‘Where?’ Rochelle craned to follow her friend’s gaze.

‘There! Spiky hair, pointy face. Hot, or what?’

‘Wow!’ Rochelle’s intake of breath was so deep her neckline almost gave way under the strain. ‘He’s looking! Make as if he knows us.’

Finger-twiddling waves in the direction of Spiky Hair ended in sighs of disappointment. Cleo glanced across as he threw back his head and laughed with two men wearing excruciatingly short platinum crops and wrap-around shades. Angie and Rochelle were probably missing the pulling power of Liza, tiny, fey, blonde man magnet. Cleo had long ago accepted philosophically that Liza was the one who turned heads. She didn’t mind because Liza, her kid sister, heap of trouble, oddball, was one of Cleo’s favourite people.

Cleo had what their mother (another tiny, fey, etc.) termed ‘dark and uncommon attractions’. All, apparently, to do with Stanislaw, a Polish grandfather who bequeathed Cleo Slavic cheekbones, a kind of stocky sexiness and medium height to make her the tallest female in her family. Her eyes, her mother decreed, were her big asset. ‘Dark and twinkly, turning down at the corners to meet your big smile turning up.’

‘Crap,’ Liza would mutter, ‘your big assets are your boobs.’

Cleo rose onto her tiptoes to do a 360-degree scan of the room. Turning back, alerted by straightening of tiny skirts and hair flicking, she saw that, despite unpromising early indications, the laughing man with the spiky hair was on his way over. ‘I saw him first!’ hissed Angie.

‘His call,’ Rochelle growled, bolstering up the contents of her bra under her thin lace top.

Spiky arrived through the throng with a dazzling smile. ‘Evening, ladies.’

‘I’m Angie!’

‘Rochelle!’

Cleo sank into the background, content to be the audience for Angie and Rochelle’s forthcoming boob-thrusting assault. But suddenly she found herself under the brown-golden gaze and it was like being fixed by the eyes of a leopard. His mouth curved. ‘I’m Justin.’

Through her astonishment, Cleo heard dual sighs of disappointment.

‘This is Cleo,’ Angie snapped, turning away.

‘Her husband’s run off,’ added Rochelle, meanly.

Cleo gazed uncertainly at Justin. His hair was cropped tightly at the sides, sharpening his features, and his smile seemed to poise him on the point of laughter. Somehow her eyes kept sliding down to his mouth – perhaps because he kept looking at hers.

Justin smiled. Centrefold material. ‘Sorry to hear about the husband.’ Cleo had never seen anyone look less sorry about anything. He cocked his head. ‘So, what did you do?’

Cleo’s stomach twisted on fresh indignation. ‘He left *in case* I did something.’

Slowly, he grinned, teeth white and narrow. ‘That’s ... unreasonable. So. Option A or Option B?’

She blinked. ‘Sorry?’

He edged nearer as people tried to push past him to the bar, dropping his head close to hers so that she could hear him over the clamouring music. Warm. He smelled of aftershave and beer. ‘Option A is where I leave you to brood about your gitty husband. Option B is where I take you to dance to forget your gitty husband.’ His eyes laughed, inviting her to join in.

‘Gav isn’t gitty,’ she objected. Then added, honestly, ‘Or not normally.’ But she thought of *THIS MARRIAGE IS OVER*. *Love Gav*. Maybe he was gitty. A bit. A bit she hadn’t noticed before.

Which was why she was there, on her own. Anger adrenaline combined headily with special brew, making her feel suddenly reckless. And free. Her head buzzed and she felt that delicious first slide into drunkenness, quarantining all common sense behind closed doors in the back of her mind. She drew in a deep breath. ‘Option B!’

She might not be dressed to pull in a pelmet skirt and see-through top like Angie and Rochelle but, man, she was pissed off enough to dance with a stranger.

The dance floor was hot and crowded. Cleo was tingling-aware of Justin’s hand in hers as he led her into the heart of it, alive and giddy with drink and naughtiness. This would show Gav. Mistrustful bastard. She’d give him something to mistrust.

She would treat herself to this naughty little step out of time, a wicked moment where there was no one to sit in judgement of her. Heedless and unbounded, she felt disconnected from her normal – married – self. No husband to guard her; no sister to make her feel safe. Cleo raised her arms and let her hair swish over her face and the beat move her, the flashing lights bathe her, the hot bodies around her give her their rhythm.

She did keep an eye out for Liza. But Liza never came.

Unbelievably, the music was winding down into the slow stuff already. She looked at her watch. One thirty!

Couples were drifting into each other’s arms and the lights had become slow and purple. Angie and Rochelle were long gone.

The passing hours and several special brews had been softening the details of the row with Gav, but now it flooded back. Like a punch in the stomach. Cleo felt freshly adrift.

Justin took her hand. ‘All right?’ His smile faded at her silence. ‘Or are you ready to select Option A?’

Her heart shrank. She'd drunk five times too much to drive home and she didn't want to face lonely, empty home anyway. When the club closed she'd get a taxi to – where? Back to Liza's to sleep in the car in the hope that, sooner or later, she'd turn up?

She shuddered, forcing a smile. 'Still Option B.' On the crowded dance floor he scooped her into his arms and she allowed herself to enjoy the delicious heat of him. She heard his breath catch, felt his hands move to the small of her back to press her closer.

His head dipped, lips close to hers, waiting. Her heart galloped.

She shouldn't.

She absolutely shouldn't.

But, slowly, tentatively, shoving the thought of Gav away because he deserved it, she did. She lifted her face to Justin's and their lips brushed, soft as angel's wings. Cleo felt lust shiver up the back of her neck as he fleeted kisses along her jawbone, each a tiny starburst of heat.

Then he slid his hand under her hair and kissed her mouth.

Their dancing halted and her fingers clutched his shoulders. When he finally released her, the floor felt spongy under her feet.

'Wow!' he breathed.

She nodded as her heart drummed the air out of her lungs. Wow.

Outside, the night air was fresh enough to make the head spin, particularly when you'd drunk as much special as she had. Clinging to Justin's arm, she tried to marshal her thoughts through the after-loud-music ringing in her ears.

Justin kissed her temple. 'There are still some taxis.' He paused. 'Where ...?'

Abortively, she checked her mobile for messages from Liza, then heaved a mega-sigh as she fought the alcohol fumes for a half-sensible idea. ‘I suppose I’d better go to my sister’s and see if she turns up.’

He ducked his head to see into her face. ‘Not home?’

*THIS MARRIAGE IS OVER.* Love Gav. ‘Taxis won’t go right out there at this time – I live in Middledip village. My car’s at my sister’s in Bretton. If she doesn’t come home I’ll sleep in it.’ In the dark. In a cold inhospitable car.

Breath whistled between Justin’s teeth and he slowly shook his head. Then, more rapidly, ‘You can’t do that. That’s not safe.’ He traced the side of her neck with his thumb. ‘You’d better come home with me.’

Oh crap, she mustn’t do that! That would be a desperate, awful thing, hurling her rather drunken self over a line that must not be crossed at any cost. She was married. Possibly. Probably.

He smiled, a huge, frank, sexy smile. ‘Don’t look so freaked, there’s a spare room. OK?’

‘Even so, I don’t think that –’ She was interrupted by the *dee-di-dee-dee* of her phone announcing a text message and scabbled thankfully in her bag. ‘Maybe this is my sister.’

But the name on the screen wasn’t *Liza*. It was *Gav*. Cleo’s shoulders sagged with relief. He’d be worried about her, apologising, offering to drive into Peterborough and pick her up –

The writings on the wall, the text said. She froze. He was reminding her! *THIS MARRIAGE IS OVER*. Fresh rage bubbled up inside her.

She snapped the phone shut and turned back to Justin. ‘It does sound better than sleeping in the car.’

In the back of the taxi, Cleo closed her eyes and let Justin kiss

her again, his hand on her waist. She ought to stop him. This wasn't fair to anybody. Ought to ...

His flat was just like him, laid back and unfussy. Sexy dark greys, drab blues, one huge black sofa, a wiiiiide-screen TV, a big computer monitor beside an impressive stereo. He made her coffee and poured clear liquid from a chilled bottle into two shot glasses.

She watched him. 'What's that? Vodka?'

He took a sip, rolled it round his mouth. 'Aquavit. It's like medicine. Couple of nightcaps and no hangover tomorrow.'

She alternated the odd, stinging liquid with sips of coffee, a mixture that totally failed to sober her up.

Justin flung his down his throat in one, then watched her over the rim of his coffee mug. 'You're lovely,' he said.

She grinned. 'You're on the make.'

He shifted on the squashy sofa until his breath was gentle on the side of her face. She turned and regarded his lips, a finely chiselled bow. The night, at first so hideous, had become a kind of dream. And in dreams all kinds of weirdness went on. Giddily, she let the lips touch hers. He gave a long *mmm* of pleasure as his hand trickled behind her knees and hooked her legs over his.

His touch almost burned. As her breathing rate increased he planted hot kisses across her face, her neck, along her collarbone until it disappeared under the fabric of her top. And all she let herself think about was how good it felt.

His voice was husky. 'There is a spare bed. I promised you could have the spare bed if you wanted it ... You don't, do you?'

Justin's bedroom held a king-sized bed and a row of wardrobes. He fished out his mobile phone. 'Let's turn these off.'

‘Good idea.’ No more horrible texts from Gav. She located the off button and placed her phone neatly next to his on a chest of drawers. Her heart hammered. She was about to do something incredibly bad. Last chance to select Option A. Last chance to retreat to the spare room. Last chance to behave well, or at least no worse than she had already. She tried to summon up Gav and their marriage.

But, somehow, the image broke up because the desire in Justin’s eyes went straight to her knees. And his hands sliding delicately up her back made her body jelly. And his tongue tip flicking across her earlobe shot spangles down her back.

Last chance, last chance ... She slid her hand inside his shirt, skimmed the hot flesh across his ribs and felt him shiver. Desire welled and she knew she was going to do it.

His hands shook as he tackled the five big buttons at the front of her top. She arched her back to help him slide it off, tipping back her head to offer him her throat as he slid her bra straps from her shoulders and struggled to extricate her from her jeans.

And she gave herself up to his tingling hands, trailing fingertips, scalding kisses.

When he entered her in one aching movement, she bit his arm, making him gasp, swear, and leap deeper inside her. ‘Cleo!’

Cleo drifted towards sleep.

Justin was already dozing. She shifted, peeling her back from his chest, the back of her legs from the front of his and he roused, pulling the quilt over them. His voice was already gravelly with sleep. ‘I didn’t ask you. Was it all right without?’

Her head was beginning to spin, making her feel queasy. She tried to concentrate. ‘Without?’

‘Without a condom.’ He pulled her back against him.

Cleo’s heart fell out of her chest. Shit. *Shit!* Appalled, her hand flew to her mouth. She shook her head.

‘Not on the pill?’

‘I’ve just changed to the diaphragm. But it’s at home.’

‘Oh,’ he said. ‘It’s not all right.’



## *Chapter Two*

He didn't feel that bad.

Not considering the excesses of the night before. Justin opened his eyes cautiously and let them ache gently in the light filtering into his bedroom.

He turned to look at the woman he'd pulled last night. Cleo, sleep tossing her dark hair across her face.

Funny, half-sad, half-angry Cleo, who'd looked frankly astounded when he'd turned away from her more obvious companions to her and her dark eyes. Cleo, who'd seemed grittily determined to act as if she were having a good time.

He eased onto his side to study her. Interesting face. High cheekbones, eyes that turned down at the corners, a wide, sexy mouth. A great body. He felt himself twitch.

She'd been lovely in bed; grave and thoughtful, seeming to enjoy him undressing her and exploring her body. Had made love with concentration, with sighs and gasps, arching towards him, enveloping him. He'd felt ready to explode.

He lifted his right arm and examined the purple mark where she'd bitten him. Really bitten! It had sent him crashing white-hot into the final fast and furious act when she'd yanked his head down to hers and they'd bruised each other's mouths. Lovely.

Cleo. She was ... catchy. Like a tune. Growing on him. He'd only anticipated a one-nighter, but she really could be fun.

Cleo woke to the smell of coffee and toast, pushing her hair from her eyes and focusing with difficulty on a man wearing only a pair of South Park boxers and sliding a tray onto the

chest at the foot of the bed.

He looked up and smiled. 'Feeling human enough for coffee?'

Her thoughts circled, seeking sense, familiarity. The night before rushed back at her. She'd slept with this guy, Justin. She was in his bedroom. Bed. Because – unreal, this bit – Gav had left her. Left! Had bellowed and roared and left that raw, hateful message on the bedroom wall.

So she'd gone out, got drunk and got laid. Oh shit.

Automatically, she responded, 'Thanks. No sugar.'

Why was she so calm?

Where was the debilitating guilt, why wasn't she clutching her sides and weeping that she'd been unfaithful to Gav?

Because the powerful anger simmering on her back burner reminded her that he didn't deserve it. *THIS MARRIAGE IS OVER ...*

'Oops!' She almost spilt her coffee as Justin climbed back into bed.

Under the quilt his leg rested hairily on hers. 'Sleep OK? You looked as if you did.'

She found herself responding to his laugh. He was really nice. She smothered a yawn. 'I need a shower.'

His eyes slid down to her breasts. 'That'd be nice.'

'If you can spare the hot water.'

His eyes twinkled. 'There's really only enough for one good shower in the morning. But there's room for two people ...'

The steaming water stung her skin. She used his herby shampoo to cleanse the smell of booze from her hair.

She jumped as he helped her wash and her flesh gathered into a million goosebumps, her head resting against him whilst he soaped her in silence. His chin was level with the top of her head. Tipping her head back he kissed her, nipping her bottom

lip. Her nipples bunched tightly as he caressed them, making her shiver. ‘Are you busy for the rest of the day?’

She turned her face and shook her head as the water flew off her hair. What would she be doing, otherwise?

Leaving him shaving, Cleo located her phone in his bedroom and turned it on. Waited. No messages. No texts. She snapped shut the smart black handset, switched it off and tossed it back on the plain wooden surface.

She drifted through Justin’s comfortable and functional sitting room, a grown-up room with no space wasted on anything that did nothing, no ornaments, no pictures. Justin obviously liked expensive but functional things: TV, DVD, computer, stereo. The big, squashy, leather sofa. In the kitchen, honey pine and shiny white tile, she filled the kettle, found bread and dropped it in the toaster. She made tea, buttered toast and perched on a red-topped stool to breakfast thoughtfully, staring through the window.

In the heat of the action when she’d been in Justin’s hands, astride Justin’s body, clutching, gasping when he nibbled at where her shoulder met her neck, only pleasure and satisfaction had been important. But now reality was rendering the tea tasteless – and the toast was in danger of reappearing.

Unprotected sex. Idiot. Moron. Irresponsible, careless slut. Unprotected sex. At her age! Talk about should have known better. She did know better. Knew every bird and bee there was, and what caused little birds and baby bees. And had avoided them like the plague!

How could she have been so stupid?

Hadn’t she always sneered at women who didn’t take care of contraception? For Cleo it had all been so straightforward till now. Married to the same man for five years, and on the

pill until erratic blood pressure had made it inadvisable.

The doctor had recommended some new intrauterine device, but the idea of a piece of plastic lodged permanently in her body had made Cleo feel odd. The notion of an implant was just as creepy. So, for the last five weeks, she and Gav had been struggling to use the diaphragm.

And, as she only slept with one man, she was hardly going to troll it around in her handbag on an evening out, was she? Because she wasn't going to need it, was she?

Except ... she had.

And until Justin had asked – too late – she hadn't given contraception a single thought. At Muggie's there had been condoms in the machine in the ladies' toilets and she'd walked right by, as if they were just for other people.

She jumped when Justin sauntered into the kitchen, the fair tips of his hair glowing like a dandelion clock in the morning light that streamed through the window. 'The service in this hotel's rubbish,' he joked, kissing the top of her head.

His eyes were so bright that Cleo found herself smiling in reply. 'Sorry. I began without you.'

He slid more bread into the toaster slots, switched the kettle back on, staggering in mock exhaustion. 'I need to keep my strength up. You are such a horny lady.' And something in his languid movements and little jokes quietened the squirming worries in Cleo's tummy.

Over his fourth slice of toast, Justin suggested, 'By the way, there's a barbecue later, if you're up for it?'

She stared out of the window at more flats across a paved area punctuated by young copper beech trees shaking in the breeze, the sunshine filtering through their purple-gold leaves. Was she up for it? Or should she be going home, sorting out her marriage? Texting Gav and asking if he wanted to talk? That's what any sane woman would do when her husband

began behaving like an alien – try and sort it out. But she remembered the hateful message on the wall and a hard splintery part of her refused to end this step out of time. ‘Sure, where do we go?’

He was already reading the paper, pouring more tea and drifting towards the sofa. ‘Out to the lakes,’ he said, glancing at the clock on the DVD player. ‘You’ve got about an hour. By the way, will your sister or anybody be wondering where you are?’

She thought of her phone with no texts and no voicemail. ‘Doesn’t look like it.’

Gav pulled up outside the house in Port Road. Cleo’s sleek blue Audi TT wasn’t there. Bollocks. Indoors, the sitting room looked as if nothing unusual had happened. No cataclysmic row, no hurting words, no stupid ultimatum. A newspaper was folded on the floor where Cleo must’ve discarded it half-read, a couple of apples in the willow-pattern bowl were wrinkling gently amongst the usual clutter of pens, bills and rubber bands.

He trailed upstairs to their bedroom, hoping it wouldn’t be there, that it would all have been a horrible dream. Oh hell. He stared miserably at his horrible, disgusting, childish message, *THIS MARRIAGE IS OVER. Love Gav*. Groaned. ‘Gav, Gav, what were you *doing*?’

Gently, precisely, he closed the wardrobe doors and pushed shut the drawers. He’d slept last night in his car and his clothes were still lying in the boot.

The bed was tidily made, undisturbed. The bed where they made love, cuddled up on cold nights or lounged with coffee and the Sunday morning papers.

So Cleo hadn’t slept here.

Her mobile, uselessly, was switched off, and having a let’s-

make-up conversation with her voicemail didn't appeal.

He picked up the phone to call Liza, Cleo's number one refuge. But all he got was Liza's annoying answering machine message, 'I'm just *never* in, am I?' He could drive over to Liza's flat ... but he didn't relish making his grovelling apologies under the beady eye of his sister-in-law. The pair of them were probably drowning Cleo's sorrows, which meant Liza would be an utter pissy bitch. Cleo's eyes would be red from crying, face white from not eating, agonising over why he, Gav, the love of her life, soulmate, darling (if he still had any claim to these titles) had acted like a prick.

And what could he tell her?

He made an inept and abortive attempt to wash the marker pen from the wall then trudged up the road to The Three Fishes, where they generally did a good lunch. Settling himself on a stool, he smiled at Janice behind the bar. 'Cheer me up – did Peterborough United win their friendly yesterday?'

A track curved from the main road between nettle banks to a clearing beside the water. According to a peeling sign, it was a lake unsuitable for water sport, but when Justin's car drew up behind the other vehicles, three jet-skis waited on trailers.

The barbecue sulked in a haze of blue, three men were unpacking beer and two women chatted over the bread rolls, sausages and chicken drumsticks.

The men waved beer cans. The women paused, drumsticks in hands, to stare at Cleo. She stared back. Justin's friends, after all, not hers. They could look all they liked; she wouldn't break.

Justin's introductions were brief. 'Gez and his girlfriend Jaz. Vicky.' Gez and Jaz grinned; Vicky didn't. Jaz was tall and had that no-nonsense look of being a girl who's one of the

boys. Vicky was the pretty one – when she wasn't slinging sausages sourly onto the barbecue. Cleo guessed that Justin had been expected alone. Better check her food was cooked through before she ate it.

'Drew and Martin you might've seen at Muggie's.'

Drew and Martin were the platinum twins. They swiped off their shades and greeted Cleo with a friendly 'Hiya!', their wetsuits of peacock colours clashing with their blazing bleach-blond hair.

Flopping down onto a crusty Regatta jacket from Justin's boot, Cleo watched with interest as Drew and Martin manhandled two of the jet-skis into the water. Drew's was silver with red lightning flashes and Martin's navy, graffiti'd with neon orange and yellow. Standing beside the skis in the shallows, they fired the engines, holding tightly to the rear as the power growled through the machine.

Moving their grip to the handlebars, each executed a practised scoot and hop aboard and in an instant they were roaring across the khaki lake, on their feet like charioteers.

'Whoo!' Cleo watched as the jet-skis skimmed across the water with their rooster tails of spray behind them, impressed by the power and manoeuvrability. Out in the middle of the lake, Drew's jet-ski howled as he squirted on power and jumped Martin's frothy wake.

Gez began to untie the remaining jet-ski and Justin helped lift it into the water. If Drew's and Martin's jet-skis were chariots Gez's was a motorbike, with a big seat, one that would take rider and pillion passenger. Cleo had always liked motorbikes.

Gez zipped up his wetsuit. With his fluffy brown hair and the wetsuit clinging lovingly to his paunch, he reminded Cleo of a teddy bear.

'Are you going out there today?' he asked Justin.

Justin glanced at Drew and Martin carving up the lake and wriggled himself into a position where he could watch over Cleo's shoulder. Two people lying on one jacket meant close proximity. 'Probably later.'

Gez skimmed out to join the others. Cleo propped herself on her elbows and admired the patterns of spray hanging on the air in the sunlight. 'You haven't got one?'

He shook his head. 'I've got a share in Gez's. I'm not as into it as the others. Drew and Martin jet ski year round.'

Cleo's gaze moved on to Vicky, sulking over the sausages. Jaz was talking earnestly, her hand on Vicky's shoulder. Cleo felt sudden compunction. She coughed. 'I don't think Vicky's very pleased to see me.'

Justin glanced up, vaguely. 'No?' He turned back to the jet-skis, howling back towards the shore, three abreast.

'I think she expected you to be ... available.'

Justin looked at Vicky again. 'Oh. I wondered what she was doing here. She's a friend of Jaz's. Jaz has this peculiarity that, although nice herself, she seems to attract high-maintenance friends.'

'Have you known the others long?' The skiers banked violently, several yards out, spewing spray rainbows to patter around Cleo and Justin and shiver on their hot skin.

Justin wiped a drop from Cleo's arm. 'Ages, since school.'

'So you were brought up locally?' It was odd, not knowing anything about his life previous to Friday evening.

'Yeah. I'm Mr Ordinary: ordinary parents who have cleared off to live in America, a sister to squabble with, a family dog. School, art and graphics course, job in graphics. Ordinary.'

She hadn't thought of him as 'ordinary', not with that face and its smile always ready to develop into a laugh, not the way people followed him with their eyes.



‘You’ll love it.’ Justin patted the jet-ski invitingly and closed the neck of his wetsuit, black with lime piping. ‘One of the girls will lend you a suit.’

Cleo looked at the jet-ski longingly.

Jaz smiled serenely from her position on a blanket, her head pillowed on Gez’s big tummy. ‘You could’ve borrowed mine, though it would swamp you. But I haven’t brought it today, sorry.’

Vicky, like flotsam washed up on the corner of the blanket, gazed across the water. ‘I don’t think I want to lend mine. It’s a bit ... personal, isn’t it? Like lending your knickers to a stranger.’ Then, insincerely, ‘Sorry.’

‘Don’t worry.’ Cleo rose and slipped off her shoes and socks. ‘I don’t need Neoprene.’

Justin stared. ‘You’re bonkers. You’ll get saturated!’

Cleo opened her eyes very wide and waded into the lake up to her knees, wet jeans rasping her ankles. ‘I’ll dry, won’t I?’

Justin shook his head, eyes laughing, and mounted the ski. Cleo clambered on behind him, locking her arms around his waist. His wetsuit felt warm and both smooth and rough. She was aware of his body beneath it.

The jet-ski bobbed, vibrating as the engine coughed. Justin shouted back above the raw sound, ‘Hold tight! Lean when I do, don’t try and sit me up. Away we go!’

The ski leapt and Cleo shrieked as she left her stomach behind, then whooped as they accelerated hard in a spout of freezing spray. Her jeans were soaked instantly, clinging and clammy as Justin slewed the jet-ski into a figure of eight, bouncing across the surface, the engine pounding woah-wow-woah.

‘Yeah!’ she yelled as Justin arced the ski into a wide turn, faster and faster, leaning further and further. She screamed as flying spray chilled her arms and plastered her hair across her

eyes. 'More!' she yelled, against the wind. And, 'Wow! Whooo! This is great!' Faster and faster until it was all she could do to cling on, lacing her fingers together on the other side of Justin, her chest against his warm back, tensing her thighs against the sensation of falling, every inch of skin stung by cold water.

Justin raced around one final circuit of the lake, then let the ski idle back to shore. Cleo was laughing, gasping, as she splashed off the ski and through the shallows. 'That was fantastic, brilliant!'

The engine died and Justin jumped down and dragged the ski in. 'You're mad! Look at the state of you.'

Cleo laughed helplessly as she squelched onto the shore, pulling her T-shirt away from her breasts, her bra showing through the wet fabric. 'But it was fabulous!'

'Come here, you crazy, crazy woman.' Justin hauled her into a big hug and a breathless kiss. 'You're an absolute headcase! You make less noise having sex.' He didn't bother to lower his voice. 'We'd better get you into something dry.'

The men laughed and Jaz grinned; but Vicky glared as Cleo squeezed lake water from her hair.

As Cleo sat in the car, grinning through an adrenaline high, wrapped in the musty Regatta jacket, Justin gripped the steering wheel against the bumpy track and shook his head. 'Everyone thinks you're mad.' He flicked the indicator and joined the road. 'You'd better marry me, madwoman. Anyway, you might be pregnant.'

Cleo's heart stopped. Laughter evaporated. Throat shut. *Marry?*

The doors at the back of her mind burst open on an abrupt heave and common sense careered out to shake an image of Gav at her, screaming, 'You're already married!'

Oh ...