

Is this Love?

Sue Moorcroft

Extract



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Chapter One

Tamara breezed in through the front door of her childhood home, Max in tow, and on into the sitting room, fending off an exuberant doggie welcome from Jabber.

‘Hel— Oh!’ She stopped short at the sight of the man talking to her parents and Lyddie, her sister.

A jolt of recognition. Jed. Jed Cassius.

The last time Tamara had seen Jed, he and Lyddie had been thirteen, a huge three years older than Tamara. Her heart twisted to remember how Lyddie had been ‘seeing’ fun, good-looking Jed Cassius, writing his name on her books at school and being told off at home for hanging out with him, instead of getting her homework done. Now, there wasn’t even recognition in Lyddie’s eyes as she treated him to her usual open and guileless smile.

‘Um, hello,’ Tamara began. When Jed Cassius only stared in response, she glanced at her parents for clues to the mood. Her father, Sean, wore his usual genial expression. But Cheryl, her mother, looked wary.

Lyddie stumped across the room, flinging herself on Tamara with a big hot hug and a wet kiss. ‘Hey, ‘Mara! Way to go!’ Way to go was Lyddie’s latest phrase. She latched onto certain combinations of words and used them over and over. Beaming, she hauled Tamara forwards, almost into Jed Cassius. ‘This is my sister, ‘Mara, and her boyfriend, Max.’

Gently, Sean took Lyddie’s arm, a signal that she needed to calm down. ‘Yes – remember Jed, Tamara? We used to be friendly with his family.’

Jed’s eyes were the green side of hazel. They hadn’t changed. But the gangling, laughing teen of Tamara’s memory had been overlaid with a self-possessed, assured man; taller, built from muscle, jaw like a blade, his hair darker. She swallowed. ‘Yes, I remember you. You lived right down Main Road, not far from Gabe Piercy’s place.’

He smiled faintly. ‘I remember you being around but I wouldn’t have recognised you.’

Lyddie was fixed firmly in chatter mode. ‘Isn’t ’Mara’s dress pretty? I like the way it shows the tops of her boobs.’

Jed Cassius was surprised into letting his eyes flicker to Tamara’s neckline and, though well used to Lyddie’s lack of inhibition, Tamara felt the beginnings of a blush.

‘Max,’ Lyddie beamed. ‘Do you like the way—?’

‘Oh, yes, Saucepan Lid.’ Max gave Lyddie’s long hair a friendly tug.

Lyddie, eyes bright, roared with laughter at the familiar joke. ‘My name’s Lyddie, not Lid! I can’t fit on a saucepan. Maxie-Max, did you buy a house?’

‘I’ve seen one I like. But it’s not in the village—’

‘Let’s talk about that later.’ Tamara shot Max a warning frown. She turned back to Jed. ‘We used to call your parents Uncle Don and Auntie Fiona. Your family moved away not long after Lyddie’s accident.’

Their departure had been only a spark of sadness in a furnace of grief, as Tamara had been forced to watch Lyddie struggling to talk in her new laborious voice and to grind through physio with her new awkward body.

Jed nodded. ‘That was us.’

Cheryl slid a brisk arm around Lyddie. ‘Come on, darling, it’s nine thirty, let’s get you ready for bed.’

If Lyddie didn’t get enough sleep she turned grouchy and difficult. But challenging behaviour had to be accepted from someone who was thirty-three-going-on-eleven, who had bits of her brain that seemed to have set like the tarmac her head had crashed onto when a speeding car had knocked her old life right out of her.

Lyddie’s mouth turned down. ‘I don’t want to go to bed. Tamara’s not going to bed.’

‘But you need your sleep, darling.’ Cheryl took her hand.

Reluctantly, Lyddie allowed herself to be guided towards the stairs. ‘Can Jabber sleep with me tonight, Mum? Just tonight? Just once? Just *once*? He’ll be good, he’s a good dog, Jabber is.’

She was wasting her breath. Cheryl never allowed Jabber to sleep upstairs and he always seemed perfectly content with his green beanbag and leopard-print fur fabric throw in the kitchen.

Sean sent Tamara a smile. ‘Jed’s come to talk to us about something.’

Jed had been watching Lyddie’s exit with eyes that were dull with shocked compassion. He switched his attention back to Sean. ‘I’d like to wait till Cheryl’s back downstairs.’

So this was no impetuous visit. Tamara’s neck prickled. ‘Would you like coffee?’

‘Thanks.’ Jed’s hair was the bronze brown of a new chestnut, straight and silky, falling into his eyes. He had the look of someone who wanted to be somewhere else: stiff, watchful.

Max followed Tamara into the kitchen. ‘I thought we were only popping in for a minute so that you could say goodnight to Lyddie? I want to talk about the house.’

She shrugged a half-apology. ‘But I want to know why Jed’s here. And it’s your house, Max. I’ve already got one, here in Middledip.’

He reached round her for the sugar canister, trapping her against the cupboards as he spooned sugar into mugs. ‘But mine will be big enough for both of us. And it’s the right side of Peterborough, so you wouldn’t be that far from your precious Middledip.’

From upstairs, Lyddie yodelled, ‘Goodnight ev-er-y-bodeeee.’

‘Goodnight, Lyddieeee,’ they all yelled back. Her bedroom door clacked shut.

Tamara bumped Max out of the way with her bum, and picked up the tray. ‘Mum will be down in a minute. Let’s get this into the sitting room.’

Cheryl trod down the stairs to rejoin them, took her coffee with a nod of thanks, and perched on the edge of an armchair. ‘Well, Jed?’

Jed accepted the cue, looking from Sean to Cheryl and then to Tamara, cradling his coffee mug. ‘My dad died recently, from cancer.’ He lifted his voice to override the murmurs of sympathy and dismay. ‘And in his last days of coherence he told me something that

he made me promise to come and tell you.'

The room went still.

Tamara felt her heart clench in anticipation.

'It was Dad,' he said. 'It was Dad who was driving the car that ran down Lyddie. He was the hit-and-run driver.'

Chapter Two

Shock and grief sucked the air from Tamara's lungs, as if she'd plunged into icy water.

Jed's frown was black across his brow. 'He asked me to ... I know there's no way to make it up to Lyddie, to you. But Dad asked me to sell his house and give Lyddie the money as compensation. He was eaten up by guilt, but he could never make himself face you with the truth.' And he added, inadequately, 'I'm sorry.'

Tamara felt Max take her hand. But all she could do was stare at Jed Cassius.

After all these years of hating the driver who hadn't stopped to help when his car flung a girl through the air, it turned out to be Don Cassius. Uncle Don, sharer of picnics and even a wet camping trip in Somerset. *Uncle Don's* car had slammed into a healthy teenager with the loudest *bang!* and left Tamara staring at a Lyddie turned rag doll.

Cheryl sank into her chair as if she were a rag doll, too. 'Get out.'

Jed put down his coffee mug and rose, face set. 'I'm so sorry. On behalf of my family, I'm so, so sorry. But I'd like to explain what Dad—'

'Just get out.' Cheryl's face began to crumple.

Sean turned to her, face anxious but voice gentle. 'It's not Jed's fault. We shouldn't shoot the messenger.'

'*Get out! Get OUT!*'

Tamara found herself on her feet. 'It's probably best if I see you out,' she said through numb lips.

Out in the hall, Jed paused, eyes haunted. 'I'm sorry,' he repeated.

'I know.' Tamara's heart seemed to be having trouble with its usual easy beat. 'It's not your fault. It's the shock. Mum can't make herself be reasonable or listen.' Her lips twisted. 'She has fixed ideas about things.'

He took a step, dropping his hand on the front-door latch. 'Even if your parents don't want to listen, will you?'

Her stomach lurched. 'I don't know. Not right now. It's come too much out of the blue. Ripped into the old wound.'

Sombrely, Jed nodded.

Tamara opened the door, watching him walk down the garden path, climb into a sporty black car close to where Max had parked his old red Porsche, and rumble away.

Max came up behind her. 'That was pretty intense. Shall I stay with you tonight?'

She wiped a sheen of sweat from her forehead as she shut the door. 'Do you mind not?'

He sighed. 'You want to be with your family?'

She was grateful that she didn't have to explain and, although he might sigh, he wouldn't get in a huff. Max was such a best friend kind of boyfriend. 'It was a bombshell. I'll stay with Mum and Dad, but you've got a car show tomorrow and you'll need to be up early.'

'I'll manage.'

Tamara shook her head. 'You'd hardly get any sleep before the photographer calls for you to whizz off to Birmingham to spend the day on your feet.'

Working a noisy, colourful show, from stand to stand. Max the journalist would have to be smiling, personable, jokey, falling into conversation, looking for the stories, the personalities, and above all, the cars. Outrageous colours, dark windows, wide rubber, flared arches, neon lights: the cars that the readers of *Charge!* adored.

'I'll leave you to it, then.' He gave her a big, long, comforting bear hug, dropping a kiss on her hair before running out to his Porsche.

After he'd roared off, Tamara trailed back into the sitting room. She found her parents facing one another. Cheryl looked as stiff as the pink-beige brocade of the sofa. 'I don't want him near us.'

Sean clicked his tongue. 'It wasn't Jed's fault, Cheryl. It was Don's.'

'I can't help it. I don't want him near.'

'That's irrational. I know it's a shock and bizarre that the hit-and-run driver turns out to be Don, after all these years. I feel as betrayed

as you. But Jed was a nice kid and he's been left with a horrible job.'

'I just don't want him near me!' Unreasoning fury burned in Cheryl's eyes.

Sean appealed to Tamara. 'What do you think?'

Slowly, Tamara let herself sink onto a chair. 'I agree it's not his fault. But ... it all just feels weird. Seeing him as a man feels weird—

—when Lyddie didn't get a chance to grow up, properly,' stuck in Cheryl. 'I don't want to see him again.'

Tamara had arrived in Max's car, which he'd now driven off to his flat in Bettsbrough. A ten-minute walk across the dark village in the drizzle with no jacket wasn't appealing, so she opted to stay the night in her old room. Her first yoga class on a Saturday wasn't until eleven, so she'd have time in the morning to go home and change.

Lying in the single bed, remembering Cheryl shaking in the wake of Jed's visit and Sean trying to comfort her while refusing to blame Jed for Don's crime, it washed over Tamara, as it had a thousand times, what her parents had lost when Lyddie was injured – the 'when the children have grown up and left' part of their lives. Greater choices. Putting themselves first. Freedom: both personal and financial. Lyddie wouldn't leave home unless they put her into some kind of institution or supervised dwelling, which Cheryl had so far refused to countenance. Lyddie did spend one weekend a month in respite care at lovely warm, airy Mountland Hall, between Bettsbrough and Peterborough, and Cheryl wasn't even keen on that. But it was kinder on Lyddie in the long run, because one day her parents were going to be too old to look after her and if Mountland Hall was her best option, the transition would be easier if it was already part of her life.

But Tamara went curly inside at the thought of Lyddie in an institution and couldn't somehow see herself letting it happen. Lyddie leaving the village that was her world? Her job in the shop? And the people she knew, the kindly middle-aged dog walkers and

Gabe Piercy, whose menagerie was a Lyddie-magnet?

It seemed as if she'd barely dropped off to sleep before the bedroom door burst open. 'Mor-ning 'Ma-ra,' sang Lyddie. 'Mum said you were here, can I get in with you?' And in a moment she was shoving her way into the small bed in her pink and white dressing gown, her arms cuddling clumsily, her kisses wet on Tamara's cheek.

Tamara didn't sigh. There was no point. Returning her sister's hug she blinked heavy eyes at the morning light filtering around the curtains.

Lyddie wriggled free to delve in her dressing gown pocket and produce a pack of *Star Wars* cards, shoving back a curtain so that she could see, making Tamara blink even more. 'Look, 'Mara, here's Queen Amidala. Isn't she pretty? I like Queen Amidala better than Queen Jamillia, don't you? Her hair's really cool. Can I have—?'

But Tamara had been in this conversation before. 'I don't think me or Mum could do your hair like Queen Amidala. They must have highly trained people to do that.'

'Movie people?' Lyddie passed several cards from one hand to the other. 'Yucky, Darth Maul.' She slapped Darth Maul's red and black face to the bottom of the pack. 'Yoda ... Yoda's really liddle, isn't he? Dot six six metre, it says. But Luke Skywalker's one dot seven two. That's bigger.' Lyddie didn't see the necessity for distinguishing between 'point' for numerical values and 'dot' for website addresses.

She crammed the cards back into her pocket and kissed Tamara's face again. 'I'm going down to see Jabber now.'

'OK, I'll be there in a minute.' Tamara flipped the curtain back into place, as Lyddie let herself out into the slice of brightness on the landing, then crunched up her eyes, willing sleep to return. But her thoughts flitted and circled like bats. Were they going to tell Lyddie who Jed was? Apparently she now had no recollection of Jed, but at one time he'd been embedded in her thirteen-year-old heart. Tamara cringed to remember hooting with laughter on discovering Lyddie writing his name on her hand and surrounding it with careful pink hearts.

Lyddie was aware that she'd had an accident that had changed her life, but she didn't remember it and had always seemed to accept that the driver's identity was a mystery. It was just so poignant, and ironic, that it should be Jed Cassius who'd returned to identify the bastard they'd all hated so thoroughly and for so long, who'd knocked Lyddie down speeding through the village as if it were a race track. How would Lyddie react to the news that it had been Jed's father? Conveying momentous information to her was hard. Confusion was never far from emotion with Lyddie.

Tamara shivered, missing her sister's heavy-breathing warmth.

Yes, she was angry with Don. But ... Jed? She tried to conjure up a share of her mother's antipathy towards him. Nope. She just couldn't make him guilty for his father's crime. Sighing, she gave up any ideas of sleep, threw off the duvet and climbed into yesterday's clothes.

Downstairs, Lyddie had parked herself in front of the television and Tamara paused in the sitting room doorway to watch her rapt, open-mouthed concentration, as a celebrity chef chopped stalks of celery with a noise like a machine gun. Tamara's heart swelled. Lyddie's condition made for challenges, but they all shared the responsibility – Tamara, Cheryl and Sean – with help from a social worker called Ginny, and Mountland Hall. Lyddie was why Tamara hadn't moved out of Middledip, why she hadn't said she'd move in with Max, although it was the next logical step in their relationship.

Tamara's heart melted whenever she looked at her sister, her tallness, the way she walked with her legs a bit stiff and her bottom sticking out, her delighted smile, her idiosyncratic perspective on the world.

Lyddie loved Tamara, too.

She also loved Jabber the Mutt, who was now lying across Lyddie's feet, lifting his head to glance at Tamara as he sent her a wave of his feathery tail. Jabber, Lyddie's doggie companion, was her protector in her wanderings about the village, making feasible small pockets of independence in her restricted life. It was only when

she was doing three-hour stints in Gwen Crowther's shop at The Cross in the centre of the village four times a week, that Jabber would doze beneath the cages of O B One Canary and Lyddie's white mice, Jar Jar and Chewy, waiting for Lyddie to burst back into his world.

Tamara turned and followed the aroma that told her someone was making coffee in the kitchen.

'I can't understand your mother,' her father proclaimed, the moment she appeared.

Yawning, Tamara took down a mug and lined it up with his in front of the kettle. 'Oh?'

O B One Canary flicked his creamy yellow tail feathers and fluted a couple of notes.

'To be furious with Don, yes. But not with Jed. Now she's insisting that if Jed turns up again, I make sure he knows he's not welcome. But I always liked the lad and it was good to see him.' He studied his reflection in the kettle, as if it could explain his wife to him if he just glared at it hard enough. Then he sighed and slid an arm around his daughter. 'And how are you?'

'A bit shocked.' Tamara stopped spooning coffee into her mug to hug him. This was the man who'd always had a cuddle for her if she'd bumped herself; the one who was most likely to find time for her when she was a teenager and everyone's attention had been on Lyddie. 'But it's not your fault, Dad, and it's not Jed's. It's Don's ... and he's dead.' She paused. 'Are we going to tell Lyddie?'

Sean blew out his cheeks. 'That, at least, we're in agreement about. No. What's the point in upsetting her? It won't help her in any way.'

'Where is Mum?'

He nodded at the kitchen window. 'Outside, massacring the hedge.'

With a sigh, Tamara took down another mug. 'I'll take her coffee out.'

Cheryl glanced around as Tamara walked up the crazy paving that

ran between two sections of close-cut lawn. She was setting about the dark green privet with savagery in every snip and snap of her garden shears. Just as well that she didn't have an electric hedge-cutter, she'd probably take off someone's legs. 'You shouldn't be out here in your bare feet.'

Tamara ignored this routine scolding. 'I've come to see how you are.' She put the coffee down on a handy garden chair.

Her mother hummed and shrugged, side-stepping along the hedge. But Tamara heard a small squeak, as if she was trying to suppress a sob. She gave her a minute, knowing better than to offer a hug while Cheryl was showing her vulnerability. Snip. Snip. *Snip*. Sniff.

'Do you want to talk things over with Dad? Shall I take Lyddie out somewhere so you can?'

'We talked last night, thank you. We've agreed to differ.' Snip-snip-snip. 'You really shouldn't be out here without shoes, you should wear slippers.'

Lyddie was a slippers person; Tamara was more spike-heeled, snakeskin boots. She waited, thinking her mother might ask her how she felt – about Jed, not about slippers.

Snip-snip-snip. Snip. *Snip*. She didn't.

..... to be continued.

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About the Author



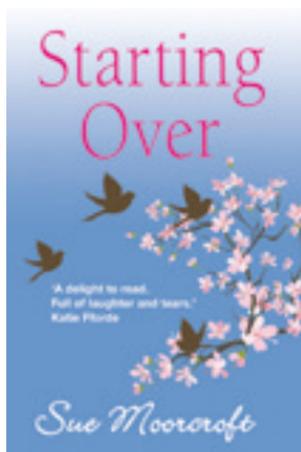
Sue Moorcroft is a working writer. *Is This Love?* is her ninth novel and sixth novel with Choc Lit – *Starting Over*, *All That Mullarkey*, *Want to Know a Secret?*, *Love & Freedom* and *Dream a Little Dream*. *Love & Freedom* won the 2011 Best Romantic Novel of the Year Award from the Festival of Romance and *Dream a Little Dream* was shortlisted for a 2013 Romantic Novel Award.

Sue has published over a hundred short stories, articles and several serials in magazines. She was a runner-up in the Ford Fiesta Short Story Competition and a winner of the Katie Fforde Bursary Award. She's a creative writing tutor for distance learning and residential courses in the UK and abroad. She has written courses for the London School of Journalism and, with her tutor's hat on: *LOVE WRITING – How to Make Money Writing Romantic or Erotic Fiction* (published Jan 2010). She is Vice Chairman of the Romantic Novelists' Association.

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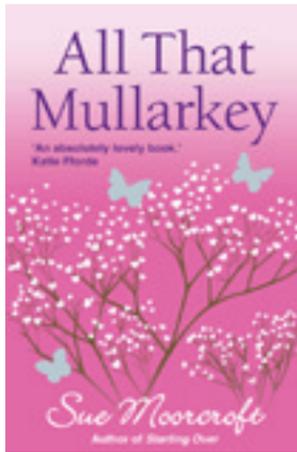
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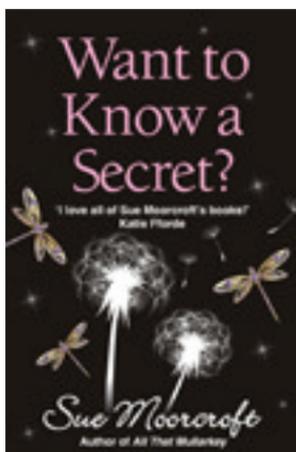
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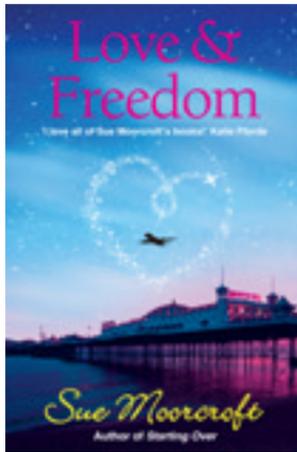
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