This opening extract is exclusive to Love**reading**.
Please print off and read at your leisure.

The Supper Club

Sophie King

One

'OhmyGodwhoputthepavlovainthetopoven?Look!It'sburnedtoacinderandIcan'tevenscrapeitoffthebakingtray.

Mike,didyoudothis?'

It was at times like this, thought Lucy as she heard herself screaming, that she missed the security of being married for a long time. Missed the old comforting familiarity when it didn't matter if you yelled like a fishwife because dinner was burned or if you accidentally farted in bed.

But now, as she looked up at Mike's surprised face, with his ruggedly handsome jawline contrasting with his soft bluegrey eyes, she suddenly wondered if she was doing the right thing in getting married again. Mike had always put her up on a pedestal. The Lucy he thought he knew was the kind of woman who wouldn't dream of shouting at the children or swearing if someone cut her up in the car. Of course, that was the Lucy she wanted to be, too. But all it took was for the kids to be rude – or a domestic disaster like that wretched pavlova which she'd put in the bottom, cooler oven until someone had moved it – and she turned into someone whom she didn't like either.

'Not me, pet,' he shrugged. 'I don't know one end of your Aga from the other. There's no way I'd have gone near it, let alone interfered with anything inside.'

Copyright © 2008 Sophie King
Published by Hodder

'I'm sorry.' How could she have lost it like that? Moving closer, she wrapped her arms conciliatorily round his neck. 'It's just that I spent ages making it and I wanted to be prepared for Saturday.'

Pulling her towards him, he stroked her hair in a way guaranteed to melt her knees. 'But you've got loads of time. Another five days. You can make another.'

His calm rational tone instantly made her feel better. Luke would have lashed out at her unfair accusations or sharply reprimanded her for wasting ingredients. It still made her feel slightly sick to recall how he'd hit the roof when Kate had spilt hot chocolate on the cream sofa. Her husband had hated mess; hated anything in fact when things didn't go right or he wasn't in control.

Now, as she snuggled into Mike, feeling his warmth envelop her, the ruined pavlova didn't seem important any more. What was it about him? Ever since they'd been introduced fifteen months ago, she'd felt this incredible chemical pull towards him which she'd never experienced before. Nor, he'd assured her, had he.

'Let's go upstairs,' she murmured.

Mike's hand slid down her back towards her bottom, gently squeezing it. 'We haven't got time, Luce. Doesn't Jon need picking up from the station about now?'

'We've got ten minutes,' said Lucy, suddenly deflated and somewhat embarrassed. Since meeting Mike, she sometimes didn't recognise herself. When Luke had been alive, sex had been something that had to be done once a week or fortnight.

Occasionally, she used to worry that she might be frigid but now she knew better. You only melted under the right touch. With Mike, it also lasted a lot longer than ten minutes. There was, she thought dreamily, nothing like a man who really loved your body. A man who spent time kissing each of her bits in turn and telling

Copyright © 2008 Sophie King

her how beautiful she was, even though she was just another ordinary middle-aged mum with a slightly baggy, post-kids tummy and blondish hair that was, right now, badly in need of its four-monthly highlights. Something else for her Must Do list. Mike brushed her lips with his before picking up his car keys from the side. 'I'll collect Jon.You make another batch of those meringuey things.'

'Sure?' Even after a year, she still found it hard to believe her luck. Not many men would take on a 'single muddle of three' as her sister patronisingly called her, let alone offer to chauffeur teenagers from the station or help them with homework.

'Absolutely.' He paused at the door, grinning at her, before coming back for another brief cuddle. The smell of his warm body – sort of lemon aftershave mixed with something indefinable – was so tempting that she pulled him towards him again. He laughed. 'We've got all night for that. It's not fair to keep Jon waiting. And look, if you want to do that pudding stuff again, why not use my oven? The temperature's more constant than yours. There are plenty of free-range eggs in the fridge and the caster sugar's in the dry ingredients cupboard.'

Briefly, she considered his suggestion. Mike's house was only a fifteen minute drive from here and it was true. His oven was more reliable than her Aga which was due for its annual servicing.

In fact, so were a lot of his things. Despite those rugged looks that were more in keeping with a handsome rugby player than a property developer, he had his own ways when it came to running a house. Not many men actually had a 'dry ingredients' pull-out storage unit, instead of simply shoving everything in to whichever cupboard or drawer it would fit in, as she did.

Years of living on his own, punctuated by long-term relationships which had never quite reached the status of 'live-in', meant Mike was far more domesticated than Lucy. Although he was five years younger – something else that niggled – he seemed more grown up somehow. Look at the neat row of socks that he would peg

Copyright © 2008 Sophie King

onto the dryer in the utility room! She just sandwiched theirs behind radiators where they inevitably fell down the back, only to be reclaimed, dusty and squashed, several months later. Yes, it might well be an idea to cook at his place.

'I'll go over tomorrow,' she said, 'when there's more time. I've got to walk Mungo now before Jon gets back.'

'That reminds me, pet. There are dog hairs again, all over the sofa. You might want to do something about them.'

Mike wasn't keen on dogs but that would come, she was sure, with time. Lucy held up her face to be kissed and watched him through the window as he strode towards his car, a gleaming silver Alfa Romeo. Immaculate inside and out.

Completely different from her own untidy Volvo which was littered with old car parking tickets, squashed, empty juice cartons from the kids, overdue library books and a rather smelly dog blanket which ought to be washed. Maybe tomorrow, if there was time.

'Hi, mum.' Kate swept past, heading for the fridge. Her purposefully-slashed jeans, thought Lucy ruefully, contained more oxygen than denim.

'Don't eat anything! It's nearly dinner.'

'Chill out, mum,' said Kate emerging with what Sam called 'half a boob melon'. She glanced, eyebrows raised, at the tray of black gooey mess sitting on top of the cooker. 'I'm starving. Anyway, looks like you've burned supper.'

'That wasn't for tonight. It was for the weekend.' Lucy proceeded to scrape the muck into the bin which needed cleaning out as Mike had gently pointed out that morning. 'By the way, did you move my pavlova to the top oven?'

Copyright © 2008 Sophie King

'Blast.' Kate neatly sliced the melon in half and spread a thick layer of peanut butter on it. 'Sorry. I only meant to do it for a sec because I needed to dry my trainers in the bottom oven.'

'But I've told you loads of times not to do that. It smells it out.'

'Well they were damp.'

'And you made me blame Mike for spoiling my pavlova.'

'Chillax, mum.' She helped herself to more peanut butter. 'I didn't make you. You did it yourself. No, Mungo, you're too fat already. So what is it with the pavlovas. Having someone round, are you?'

'Kate, please don't talk with your mouth full. And yes, Antony and his new girlfriend are coming over and Jenny's bringing someone too.'

Kate raised her eyebrows and Lucy winced again, still unused to that awful gold ring which her daughter had had inserted above her left eye the other month.

'Antony's bringing his new girlfriend?' repeated Kate, giving her one of those 'Are-you-sure-you-know-what-you're-doing, mum?' looks that always made Lucy feel like a kid instead of an adult. 'Wow! Have you told Maggie?'

Lucy felt a twinge of guilt. 'Not exactly.'

'You mean no.' Kate sucked the knife before putting it back into the peanut butter and spreading it on a slice of bread, this time. 'You ought to ask her too. That would really be fun.'

'No, it wouldn't. And stop eating. You won't want supper.'

She sighed. 'To be honest, I wasn't sure about Antony bringing her either. But there wasn't much I could do about it.'

Copyright © 2008 Sophie King

It was true. Antony was Mike's best friend and it was him and Maggie she had to thank for introducing Mike to her. Maggie was her closest female friend after they'd been at school together locally. Two years ago, Maggie had confided that she and Antony really weren't that happy but had agreed to soldier on for the sake of the children. Lucy had presumed they'd just continue rather as she and Luke had. As Maggie said, it wasn't as though there were any awful arguments; merely an undercurrent of just-about-bearable dissatisfaction.

Then Antony had met Patsy – a model! – and almost overnight, he left a twelve-year marriage and two children.

Maggie had been, and still was, inconsolable. Their other friends, like Chrissie, claimed not to understand that but Lucy could. It was all very well knowing your marriage wasn't great but it didn't mean you weren't upset when it ended.

'Who's Aunty Jenny bringing?' demanded Kate, noisily sucking peanut butter off her fingers.

Lucy flushed as she weighed out the soft granulated sugar for an apple crumble, accidentally spilling some of the floor.

'Er, she doesn't know.'

'What do you mean, she doesn't know?' Kate's eyes glinted with amusement. 'You're hiding something from me, mum.'

Damn. Now she'd gone and trod in the sugar and it would get walked all over the rest of the house. 'If you must know, I said I'd invited that new chap who's moved in opposite to look after his father.'

'A blind date? That's so uncool.'

'I know, I know. But it's better than being on her own.'

Copyright © 2008 Sophie King

'I dunno.' Kate tossed back her hair defiantly. 'If I hadn't found the right person by Aunty Jenny's age, I'd have a baby from a sperm bank.'

'It's not just a baby she wants,' began Lucy, wondering if she should have this kind of conversation with a sixteen-year-old.

'Sure. It's the company.' Kate mimicked her mother's voice.

'Whatever. I just hope you know what you're letting yourself in for. You know Aunty Jenny. If she doesn't like him, she'll say so.'

Lucy felt a wave of unease at the prospect of falling out with a new neighbour. 'You're probably right.'

'What's he called anyway, this bloke?'

She tried to remember. What was it about middle age and memory loss? It seemed that as soon as she'd turned forty, her brain had turned over and gone to sleep. Names, numbers – especially mobiles – and dates simply floated away out of reach when she tried to recall them. And the ginko tablets, which Jenny had got from one of her health clients, didn't seem to be doing anything.

'Gary, I think.'

Kate snorted. 'Well you'd better remember before he arrives or you'll have fun with the introductions. By the way, you know you and Mike were talking about going to the Lake District? Don't take it the wrong way but Sam and I really don't want to go. It's just not our thing.'

She gave Lucy a brief 'sorry' hug and then sprang back.

'Shit, is that the time? Big Brother's started.'

Copyright © 2008 Sophie King

'What about your homework?' called out Lucy as the door banged and the noise of the television filtered through. Too late.

Sitting down at the kitchen table, she felt Mungo's wet nose in her lap as though sensing her mood. A small part of her had really hoped the two youngest would come on holiday with them, even though Jon would be at uni. It might, she and Mike had agreed, help bond them as a family. But that was the trouble, wasn't it?

However much she tried to pretend with cosy suppers round the kitchen table and wet holidays in the Lakes, they couldn't be a family. Not a proper one. Not without a real blood-related father. And as she was beginning to learn from her children's cool attitude to Mike, a future stepfather simply wasn't the same. Especially when, in the kid's eyes, he had to live up to the memory of a dead hero.

A hero who should never have died in the first place.

Copyright © 2008 Sophie King