The Adultery Club

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1

Nicholas

Divorce is a difficult business. Never more so, may I suggest, than when your client authoritatively declares all men are bastards, and you're left shifting uncomfortably in your seat whilst your penis tries to make itself scarce.

'Not *all* men, Mrs Stephenson,' I venture.

My client ignores my genial smile, grey eyes flicking dismissively around my oak-panelled office. Her gaze briefly snags on the silver-framed photograph of my wife propped beside the leather blotter on my desk; her expression of pity for my spouse places me foursquare with those unfortunates whose parents neglected the legal niceties before bedding down together. Since I have just secured her an extremely generous seven-figure settlement from her ex-husband, I find her disdain for my sex in its entirety a little unfair.

She stands and I rise with her, straightening my silk tie. She extends a scrawny pink tweed arm; her hand sits like a wet fish in mine.

'You may be right, Mr Lyon,' she says drily. 'Maybe it's just the men I marry.'

Her scent is pungent and overpowering: synthetic cat's piss. Far too much make-up; I can't imagine kissing the jammy red lips. She's the kind of woman one would find smeared all over the sheets in the morning, the pillowcase imprinted with her face like the Turin Shroud.

Good legs, though. Slender, neat calves, with nicely turned ankles. But no meat on her bones, and breasts like a boy.

My professional smile does not slip as I escort her to the door. I endeavour not to morally judge my clients: it's distracting and unproductive. There's no place in the context of divorce law for emotion or sentimentality; one has quite enough of that kind of thing from one's clients. My wife, of course – being a woman – begs to differ. *I* consider myself merely objective. Malinche, however, asserts that my 'brutal kind of truth', as she emotively puts it, is akin to judging a woman's skin only in the harsh glare of daylight, rather than by the softening glow of the fire. I can't quite see her point.

My client stops suddenly in the doorway; I almost run into the back of her. Her head dips as if in prayer, exposing pale, downy vertebrae beneath the stiff blonde bob.

The nape of a woman's neck – so vulnerable, so quixotically erotic.

'I always thought – *hoped*—' she chokes back a sob, 'he'd change his mind.'

I'm at a loss. I certainly did not have this woman pegged as a clinger. Still the right side of forty, she has already acquired a remunerative trio of wealthy

ex-husbands, which – despite every effort at objectivity – leads one to make certain assumptions. Put simply: the last thing I expected was for *love* to come into it.

The woman's skinny shoulders start to shake. *Oh, Christ.* I'm so hopeless at this kind of thing. My arms twitch uselessly. Inappropriate in the extreme to hug, but what to do if – God forbid – she starts grizzling all over the place?

Suddenly her head comes up and she squares her shoulders, reminding me of my eldest daughter Sophie on her first day at school. Without another word, she marches through the open-plan secretarial pool and into the hallway beyond. I breathe a hefty sigh of relief. Thank God. What on earth was *that* all about?

As I move to close my door, my secretary, Emma, waves.

'Mr Lyon, it's your wife on line two. She says she's sorry to bother you, but can she just have a quick word?'

'Of course—'

I hesitate in the doorway. There's something I can't quite . . .

'It's my hair, Mr Lyon,' Emma says patiently. 'I had it cut this lunchtime.'

A pity. I rather liked it long.

I return to my desk, glancing at the photograph of Malinche that so aroused my client's compassion as I pick up the phone. It was taken a couple of Christmases ago – by Kit, irritatingly, rather than by me – at the moment she glanced, smiling, over her shoulder, half-bending to pull the turkey from the Aga. I feel a thud of gratitude every time I look at it. It's foolish, I know, but even after ten years I still thrill to the words 'your wife'. Quite how I

won the heart of this extraordinary and beautiful woman is utterly beyond my comprehension. I am merely eternally thankful that I did.

'Chocolate–orange sponge cake flavoured with vanilla, orange and lemon zest, or apricot chequerboard cake with chocolate ganache?' Mal demands without waiting for me to speak.

I can tell from my wife's strangled tone that she has the handset wedged between her chin and chest and is no doubt stirring something mouth-watering even as we speak. 'May one inquire—'

'Heavens, Nicholas, don't be so pompous,' Mal says briskly. 'You're not in Court now. Your surprise birthday cake, of course. Metheny insists we finish it this afternoon before you get home.'

I smile at the mention of my youngest daughter, with whom I share a birthday, preternaturally long toes and a wicked fondness for pistachio ice-cream. I had hoped to share a great deal more, but the ultrasound proved itself less than infallible and my much-longed-for boy and potential fishing and cricket companion turned out to be a surprise third petticoat. As a consolation prize I was allowed to name her for my lifelong hero, jazz guitarist Pat Metheny.

'Let me talk to her and ask her which she suggests,' I posit.

'Don't be silly, Nicholas.'

'You were the one who said she was insisting—'

'There's more than one way to insist on something, as you should know.'

Her mellifluous voice takes on an unmistakable bedroom timbre, and there's a sudden rallying cry in my

trousers as images of well-toned caramel thighs, silk stockings and coffee-coloured lace flash unbidden across my mind's eye. My witch of a wife is well aware of the effect she's having on me, to judge by the laughter that now replaces the come-hither tone in her voice.

'Anyway,' she lilts, 'you can't talk to her or it won't be a surprise.'

'I'll give you a surprise—'

'Now, it wouldn't really be a surprise, would it?'

'Someone's feeling cocky,' I say. 'What makes you think I'm not talking about the latest council tax bill?'

'What makes you think *I'm* not?'

'Are you?'

'I'm talking cakes, Nicholas. Come on, make up your mind before I have to put two candles on Metheny's instead of one.'

'Will I get candles too?'

'Yes, but not forty-three or the cake will melt.'

'Cruel woman. You too will be forty-three one day, you know.'

'Not for another six years. Now, Nicholas.'

'The chocolate–orange sponge cake, of course. Would it be possible to request bitter chocolate shavings with that?'

'It would. Metheny, please take your foot out of Daddy's bowl. Thank you. How did the lovely Mrs Stephenson's case go?'

'Seven figures,' I report.

'Almost double her last divorce. How wonderful. I could almost consider a divorce myself.'

I hear my wife lick her fingers and my erection nearly heaves into view above the desk. 'If I thought you could

procure seven figures from it, darling, I'd draw up the papers for you,' I offer, groaning inwardly as I rearrange my balls. 'Can't get blood out of a stone, unfortunately.'

'Oh, that reminds me: Ginger rang from the garage this morning about the Volvo. He said he's fixed the whatever-it-was this time, but it's on its last legs. Or should that be wheels?' Her voice ebbs and flows in my ear as she moves about the kitchen. 'Anyway, he doesn't think he'll be able to nurse it through its dratted MOT in January. So there's no help for it, I've just *got* to gird my loins and finish the new book, get the rest of my advance—'

'Darling, I think I can afford to buy my wife a new car if she needs one,' I interrupt, nettled. 'Sometimes you seem to forget I'm a full equity partner now, there's absolutely no need for you to knock yourself out writing cookery books these days.'

'I *like* writing cookery books,' Mal says equably. 'Oh, God, Metheny, don't do that. *Poor* rabbit. Sorry, Nicholas, I have to go. I'll see you at the station. Usual time?'

I suppress a sigh of exasperation.

'For God's sake, Malinche, it's William's retirement party this evening! Don't tell me you've forgotten! You're supposed to be on the five twenty-eight from Salisbury to Waterloo, remember?'

'So I am,' Mal agrees, unperturbed. 'I hadn't really forgotten, it just slipped my mind for a moment. Hold on a second—'

In the background I hear a series of strange muffled thumps, and then Metheny's contagious, irrepressible giggles.

Life can be full of surprises. When we learned that Mal was unexpectedly pregnant for the third time I was absol-

utely horrified. Sophie and Evie were then eight and five; we'd just got them to the stage where they were recognizably human and could do civilized things like skiing or coming out to dinner with us without spending most of the meal crawling around under the table. Now we were to be plunged back into the grim abyss of sleepless nights and shitty nappies. It was only the thought of a son and heir at last that consoled me, and when even that silver lining turned out to be a mirage, I despaired. And yet this last tilt at parenthood has been the sweetest of all. Metheny holds my hardened lawyer's heart in her chubby starfish hands.

An echo of small feet on worn kitchen flagstones; and then a squeal as Mal scoops her up and retrieves the telephone receiver. 'I really *must* go, Nicholas,' she says, slightly out of breath.

'You did remember to arrange a babysitter?'

'Mmm. Yes, Kit very sweetly said he'd do it.'

I have absolutely nothing against those who choose alternative lifestyles. There is, of course, more to a person than their sexuality. I just don't quite see why it must be forced down one's throat, that's all. I do not parade my red-blooded heterosexuality to all and sundry, although it's self-evident. I simply cannot understand why certain sections of the so-called 'gay community' – so sad, the way that decent word has been hijacked – feel the need to rub one's nose in *their* choice of bedmate. However.

I accepted long ago that when I asked Malinche to be my wife, Kit Westbrook was a minor but salient part of the package. *Praemonitus praemunitus*, after all: forewarned, forearmed. And I am not the sort of man to start objecting to his wife's friendships, however unsavoury;

and in any event, Kit is certainly not, and never has been, a threat.

We met, the three of us, twelve years ago in Covent Garden. I had taken my parents to the opera – *La Bohème*, if memory serves – to mark my father's seventieth birthday. Having hailed them a taxi, I was strolling alone through the pedestrian piazza en route to the tube station and thence to my rooms in Earls Court; I remember rather wishing that for once there was someone waiting at home for me. Despite the lateness of the hour, the square still boasted its usual collection of street performers, and I was just fending off a rather menacing young man mocked up in heavy black-and-white face-paint and thrusting a collection hat under my nose, when I noticed a unicyclist start to lose control of his cycle. It swiftly became clear that this wasn't part of his act, and for a moment I watched with morbid fascination as he swung back and forth like a human metronome before waking up and pulling myself together. I barely had time to pull a young woman out of the path of his trajectory before he toppled into the small crowd.

At the last moment, he managed to throw himself clear of the spectators, executing a neat forward roll on the cobbles and leaping up to bow somewhat shakily to his audience.

I realized I was clasping the young lady rather inappropriately around the chest, and released her with some embarrassment. 'I do apologize, I didn't mean—'

'Oh, please don't! If it weren't for you, I'd be squished

all over the cobblestones. You must have quick reflexes or something, I didn't even see him coming.'

She was startlingly pretty. Unruly dark hair the colour of molasses, sparkling cinnamon eyes, clear, luminous skin; and the most engaging and infectious smile I had ever seen. In her early twenties, at a guess; fine-boned and petite, perhaps a full foot shy of my six feet two. I could span her waist with my hands. I find small, delicate women incredibly attractive: they bring out the masculine hunter-gatherer in me.

I noticed that the top two buttons of her peasant-style blouse had come undone in the mêlée, revealing a modest swell of lightly tanned bosom cradled in a froth of white broderie anglaise. My cock throbbed into life. Quickly, I averted my eyes.

She stood on tiptoe and gripped my shoulder. At her touch, a tumult of images – that glorious hair tangled in my hands, those slender thighs straddling my waist, my lips on her golden breasts – roared through my brain.

'Oh, Lord, you've ripped your coat,' she exclaimed, examining my shoulder seam. 'It's all my fault, wandering around in a *complete* daze, I was thinking about the walnuts, you have to be so careful, of course, don't you, not everyone likes them, and *now* look at you—'

I have no idea what nonsense I gabbled in return.

'Malinche Sandal,' she said, thrusting her small hand at me.

I returned her firm, cool grip. 'Ah. Yes. Nicholas Lyon.' I coughed, trying not to picture her hands wrapped around my— 'What a very unusual name,' I managed.

'I know.' She grimaced. 'My mother is this total hippy,

she's convinced our names determine our characters and the *entire* course of our lives – too much acid in the Sixties if you ask me, though perhaps she's right, you can't imagine a romantic hero called Cuthbert, can you, or King Wayne, it just doesn't work – but anyway, she decided better safe than sorry, just to be *quite* sure. My older sister got stuck with Cleopatra, so I suppose I should be grateful I ended up with Malinche, it could have been Boadicea!'

She glanced down, and I realized I was still holding her hand.

With a flush of embarrassment, I released it, praying she hadn't noticed the tent-pole erection in my trousers.

'Of course! I knew it rang a bell. Malinche was the Indian girl who learned Spanish so that she could help Cortes conquer Mexico in the sixteenth century; without her spying for him he might never have succeeded—' I gave a sheepish smile. 'Sorry. Don't mean to go on. Oxford history degree, can't help it.'

Malinche laughed delightedly. 'No, it's wonderful! You're the first person I've ever met who's actually *heard* of her. This is amazing, it must be Fate.' She slipped her arm through mine and grinned up at me with childlike trust. I stiffened, my loins on fire. 'Now, how about you let me cook you dinner to say thank you?'

'Oh, but—'

'Please do. You'd be quite safe, I'm a trained chef.'

'But how do you know *you* would be? You don't even know me.'

'I can always tell,' she said seriously. 'You look like the kind of man who would be honest, fair, and most importantly, optimistic.'

'Well, that is most kind, but—'

'Do you like walnuts?'

'Yes, except in salads, though I don't quite—'

'We were *meant* to meet this evening, don't you see, you knew all about my name and that has to be a sign. And you like walnuts – well, except in salads, which don't count, no one sensible likes walnuts in salads. It's serendipity. You can't turn your back on that, can you?'

'It's not a question of—'

'The thing is,' she added earnestly, tilting her head to one side and looking up at me with those glorious toffee-coloured eyes, 'I'm trying to write a cookery book and my entire family is just fed up with being *fed*, if you see what I mean. Even my friends say they'd give anything just to have pizza and I'm simply *desperate* for a new guinea pig. You seem a very kind, decent man, I'm sure you're not an axe-murderer or anything—'

'Ted Bundy was handsome and charming and murdered at least thirty-six women,' a laconic voice drawled behind us.

Malinche swung round, spinning me with her. I was beginning to feel a little bemused by the unexpected direction my evening was taking.

'Kit, at last! Where have you been?'

A saturnine young man in his twenties thrust a paper bag at her. 'Getting the bloody blue mood crystals you wanted,' he responded tartly. 'Who's the new arm candy?'

'Nicholas Lyon,' I said, overlooking his rudeness and extending my hand.

The young man ignored it, taking possession of Malinche's free arm and glaring at me as he linked us together

in an ungainly *ménage à trois* which – though I didn't know it then – was a precursory metaphor for our relationship down the years.

'Oh, Kit, don't be difficult,' Malinche sighed. 'Mr Lyon, this is Kit Westbrook, my oldest and apparently crossest friend, and one of those very weary guinea pigs I was telling you about. Kit, Mr Lyon just saved me from being squashed by a runaway unicyclist, and tore his very smart coat in the process. So stop being so dog-in-the-manger and help me persuade him to come back with us for dinner, he's being *far* too polite about it all.'

'Nicholas, please.'

'I don't mean to be rude,' Kit said, clearly meaning it very much, 'but Mal, you don't know this man from Adam. You *can't* just go round inviting strange men home for dinner, even if they do rescue you from certain death by circus performer.'

'Your friend is right,' I concurred regretfully. 'You really shouldn't take such risks, although I'm not actually a psychopathic serial killer; which suddenly makes me feel rather dull—'

Malinche pealed with laughter. 'See?' she said, as if that settled everything. As, in the end of course, it did.

I realized right from the start that Kit wasn't a rival for Malinche in the usual sense of the word. There was too much of the Sebastian Flyte about him, and he was always too flamboyantly dressed to be anything other than homosexual – in the midst of the dress-down, austere nineties, he sported velvet frock coats and waterfall lace cravats and knew the names for a dozen different shades of beige. But as far as Kit was concerned, Malinche was *his* best

friend, and even now, after a decade of marriage and three children, he still hasn't quite accepted that she has a husband who has first call upon her. And then there was the matter of Trace Pitt, of course.

Nothing is ever quite as it seems with Kit. He is, after all, an actor. In fairness though, I must admit he's been a conscientious godfather, always remembering birthdays and the like. And the girls adore him. Not necessarily my first choice; but there we are.

My secretary ushers my four o'clock appointment into my office. I wish I'd thought to remind Mal to bring William's retirement gift with her. In her current mood, she'd be quite likely to bake it in the Aga and wrap the birthday cake instead. For the life of me, I can't recall what she said she'd bought, but I'm quite certain it will be eminently appropriate. Mal's gifts always are, she just has that feminine knack. I always leave Christmas and birthdays entirely to her, even for my side of the family. She's just so much better at it.

Firmly putting personal matters out of my mind, I pull a pad of foolscap towards me and unscrew the lid of my fountain pen. It's not as if Kit could ever do anything to undermine my marriage. We're far too strong for that.

Mr Colman is a new client, so I take detailed longhand notes as he describes the unhappy route that has led him here, to the grim finality of a divorce lawyer's office. He's aptly named, with hair the colour of mustard and a sallow cast to his skin. Once we have established the basics, I explain the bureaucratic procedure of divorce, the forms

that must be filed, the documents supplied, the time and the cost – financial only; the emotional price he will soon discern himself – involved.

'We want it all to be amicable,' he interrupts brightly. 'There's no need to run up huge bills arguing over the plasma TV, we've both said that. We just want to get on with it, make a clean break of things. For the children's sakes.'

I refrain from telling him that it's not about the plasma television, it's never about the *television*; at least to begin with. It's about a husband dumping his wife of twenty years for a younger, bustier model. It's about a wife jettisoning her balding husband for a Shirley Valentine affair with the Italian ski instructor. It's about disappointment, hurt, banality and betrayal. But because you cannot quantify any of these things, in the end it *does* come down to the television, and the spoons, and that hideous purple vase Great-aunt Bertha gave you as a wedding present that you've both always hated, and which you will now spend thousands of pounds fighting to own.

All but a handful of my clients – the hardened marital veterans, repeat customers who've been divorced before – sit before me and tell me they want their divorce to be amicable. But if they were capable of resolving their differences amicably, they wouldn't be in my office in the first place.

'And the grounds for the petition?' I ask briskly.

Always a revealing moment, this. For the first time, Mr Colman looks uncomfortable. I know instantly there is another woman in the wings. I gently explain to my client that if his wife has not deserted him or committed adultery – he responds with almost comic indignation that she

has not – and will not agree to a divorce, as the law stands he will either have to wait five years to obtain his freedom without her consent, or else cobble together a charge of unreasonable behaviour.

'I can't wait five years!' he exclaims. 'I've only been married to the bitch for four! I call *that* un-fucking-reasonable.'

The path from amicable to Anglo-Saxon has been even shorter than usual.

'Mr Colman, please. Let us be calm. It is my experience that the wife can usually be persuaded to divorce her husband if there are sufficient grounds rather than face a charge of unreasonable behaviour. *Are* there such grounds?' He nods curtly. 'Then I feel sure we can persuade *her* to divorce *you*.'

'Going to cost me, though, isn't it?' he says bitterly. 'She'll take me to the fucking cleaners.'

'It's more a question of weighing up what is most important to you, and focusing on that,' I say neutrally.

It is with relief that I finally bid the intemperate Mr Colman farewell some fifty minutes later. Working at the grimy coalface of marital breakdown is never pleasant, but usually I draw comfort from the thought that my interposition makes palatable what is unavoidably a very bitter pill for most of my clients. At five o'clock on a bleak November Friday, however, after a very long week dealing with the Mrs Stephensons and Mr Colmans of this world, it's hard to feel anything other than despair at the intractable nature of human relationships.

The better part of two decades as a divorce lawyer has brought me no closer to fathoming how people find themselves in these painful imbroglios. I know that old-

fashioned morality is very *passé* these days, but having witnessed the destruction and misery that infidelity wreaks – and adultery is invariably the rock upon which the marital ship founders – I can say with some authority that a quick how's-your-father in the broom cupboard is *never* worth it.

My view is skewed, of course, by the scars of my own childhood. But an inbuilt bias towards fidelity is, I think, a *good* thing.

I realize, of course, how lucky I am to have a happy marriage. Mal firmly believes that Fate meant us to be together – her *bashert*, she calls me. Yiddish for 'destined other', apparently (she spent a summer on a kibbutz with a Jewish boyfriend when she was seventeen). I'm afraid I don't believe in that kind of superstitious Destiny nonsense, any more than I do horoscopes or tarot cards; but I'm only too aware how rare it is these days to attain your fifth wedding anniversary, never mind your tenth.

Reminds me. Ours is sometime around Christmas – the eighteenth or nineteenth, I think. I must remember to find her something particularly special this year. She'll kill me if I forget again.

I spend the next couple of hours or so absorbed in paperwork. When Emma knocks on my door, it is with some surprise that I note that it is almost seven.

'Mr Lyon, everyone's going over to Milagro's now for Mr Fisher's party,' she says. 'Are you coming with us, or did you want to wait for Mrs Lyon?'

'I believe she said she'd get a taxi straight to the restaurant from the station. But I need to finish this Consent Order tonight. You go on ahead. I'll be with you as soon as I'm done.'

Emma nods and withdraws.

Quietly I work on the draft Order, enjoying the rare peace that has descended on the empty office. Without the distraction of the telephone or interruptions from my colleagues, it takes me a fraction of the time it would do normally, and I finish in less than forty minutes. Perfect timing; Mal should be arriving at the restaurant at any moment.

I loosen my braces a little as I push back from my desk, reflecting wryly as I put on my jacket and raincoat that being married to a celebrity cook is not entirely good news. I rather fear my venerable dinner jacket, which has seen me through a dozen annual Law Society dinners, will not accommodate my burgeoning waistline for much longer.

Bidding the cleaner good evening as I pass through reception, in a moment of good resolution I opt to take the stairs rather than the lift down the four floors to street level.

As I come into the hallway, I find a young woman of perhaps thirty in a pale green suit hovering uncertainly by the lifts, clearly lost. She jumps when she sees me and I pause, switching my briefcase to the other hand as I push the chrome bar on the fire door to the stairwell.

'Can I help you?'

'I'm looking for Fisher Raymond Lyon. Am I on the right floor?'

'Yes, but I'm afraid the office is closed for the night. Did you want to make an appointment?'

'Oh, I'm not a client,' she says quickly. 'I'm a solicitor. My name's Sara Kaplan – I'm starting work here next Monday.'

'Ah, yes, of course.' I let the fire door swing shut and extend my hand. 'Nicholas Lyon, one of the partners. I'm afraid I was detained on a difficult case in Leeds when my colleagues interviewed you, I do apologize. I understand you come very highly recommended from your previous firm.'

'Thank you. I'm very much looking forward to working here.'

'Good, good. Well, welcome to the firm. I'll look forward to seeing you on Monday.'

I hesitate as she makes no move to leave.

'Miss Kaplan, did you just want to drop off some paperwork, or was there something else?'

She fiddles nervously with her earring. The uncertain gesture suggests she's rather younger than I had at first thought, perhaps twenty-five, twenty-six. 'Um. Well, it's just that Mr Fisher invited me to his leaving party, and I thought it might be nice to meet everyone before Monday—'

'Oh, I see. Yes, of course. It's not here, though, it's at the Italian restaurant across the road. I'm just going over there myself.'

Eschewing the stairs for the sake of courtesy, I summon the lift and we stand awkwardly next to each other, studiously avoiding eye contact, as it grinds its way up four floors. She's tall for a woman, probably five ten or so. Short strawberry blonde hair, wide swimmer's shoulders, skin honeyed by the sun and generous curves that will run to fat after she's had children if she's not careful. Her nose is a little large, but surprisingly it doesn't ruin her appearance – quite the contrary. Its quirky route down her face leavens otherwise predictable, glossy good looks.

I suspect a fearsome intellect and formidable will lurk behind those clear mushroom-grey eyes. Attractive, in a magnificent, statuesque way, but absolutely not my type at all.

Although she does have a certain earthiness. A just-fallen-out-of-bed air.

Christ, *I want her.*