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The Infidelity Chain

Tess Stimson

Please note that this extract contains scenes of an adult nature.

CHAPTER ONE
ELLA

I've often wondered if adultery runs in the genes, like blue eyes or buck teeth. Am I unfaithful because it's written in my DNA?

The idea appeals to the scientist in me: we're all the sum of our genetic barcodes, no more, no less. See, yes, there it is, nestling between my red hair and tendency towards the pear-shaped (hips, life, take your pick) – there, see, infidelity, clear as day. Biological proof that I can no more stay faithful than shrink a shoe size, however hard I try.

William stirs next to me. He reaches for my breast, and my nipple peaks instantly beneath his touch. His cock jabs my hip, already hard again. I smile. After eight years, we don't have sex that often, but when we do, we get our money's worth.

He rolls onto his back and pulls me onto him; I wince slightly as he enters me. He isn't to know I had sex with Jackson – twice – last night.

As he thrusts upwards, I cling to the brass bedstead for support, my breasts shivering tantalizingly above his mouth. His lips fasten on my nipple and there's a zigzagging pulse between my legs. I tighten my grip. William is the more selfish lover; I've learned to take my pleasure from him without asking. Jackson is far more thoughtful: always seeking out new ways to please me, holding himself in check until I've come, sometimes three or four times.

I shunt Jackson out of my head. Contrary to popular myth, women can be good at adultery. All they have to do is learn to think like a man.

My clit rubs against William's pelvis, and the familiar heat builds. His teeth graze my breast; swift, greedy bites. I reach between his legs, skittering my fingernails along the inside of his thighs and across his balls. He bucks inside me, hitting my G-spot,

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and I stiffen, savouring the moment at the crest of the rollercoaster. Then my orgasm breaks over me in sweeping, almost painful, waves.

With one hand, I find the tiny sensitive spot between his balls and asshole, pressing just enough to send him wild. With the other, I reach for my beeping phone.

Only two people would text me this late at night. Jackson, or –

'Shit!' I tumble off him, groping for my clothes.

He slams his head against the pillow. 'Christ. I thought you weren't on call tonight?'

'Emergency.' I hook up my bra, and scrabble under the bed for my knickers. 'I'll be back as soon as I can.'

'Couldn't it have waited until after I came?'

I give up on the knickers, and pull on my grey pencil skirt before sliding my feet into a pair of skyscraper scarlet heels. I can only find a single topaz earring; I hate losing one of a pair.

Buttoning up my white silk shirt, I lean forward and drop a kiss on his sandpaper cheek. He smells of my sex. 'Happy Valentine's Day.'

William scowls. 'You owe me.'

'Get in line.'

Fifteen minutes later, I ease my toes from the to-die-in stilettos as the lift grinds its way up to the obstetric floor. My mobile rings again as I reach the labour ward. Peering through the glass porthole, I realize my patient must still be in the back of an ambulance trapped in stubborn traffic somewhere on the Fulham Road, and take the call.

'You've got five minutes,' I tell Jackson.

'That's not what you said last night,' he teases, his Deep South drawl undiminished by nearly a decade in England.

I'm not having an affair because my sex life with my husband is either infrequent or unsatisfying. On the contrary: he's a conscientious lover. Though I have plenty of plausible reasons for my infidelity, I'm not sure that I can actually find an excuse that excuses me.

I shrug on my white coat. 'What is it?'

'I need to talk to you.'

'Now? Can't it wait?'

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He hesitates. 'I just found this neat motorcycle on eBay, an Indian. The bids end at midnight, and I wanted to talk to y'all about it first –'

I can't help thinking he was going to say something else.

'A motorbike?'

'Think of it as a belated birthday present.'

I close my eyes, suddenly awash with remorse. 'Oh, Jackson. I'm sorry.'

'Forget it.'

'I've been so busy at the hospital – we're understaffed –'

'I said forget it.'

'Look, we'll go out at the weekend, I promise. I'll make up some excuse –'

'Sure.'

'You'll enjoy it more when you're feeling better anyway.' Then, partly to appease my conscience; and partly because, despite William, despite everything, it is still true, I add, 'I love you.'

'Love you more.'

It's our catchphrase, one of those couply exchanges you develop in the early months together and then later cling to, like a lifebelt, out of mingled superstition and hope and fear when the going gets rough.

It is also, in six words, a synopsis of our marriage.

I let myself quietly back into William's flat a little after four in the morning, my mood oppressed. A sense of unease drags at my heels. For the first time in years, I crave a cigarette.

Pouring myself a glass of tap water, I add four ice-cubes and tiptoe through the darkened hallway towards the bedroom, wincing like a teenager as the ice clinks noisily in the sweating glass. For a long moment, I stand in the open doorway, leaning against the jamb. Asleep, William looks younger than his forty-eight years, the cynicism stripped from his expression. He is not conventionally handsome; his features are too uneven for that. A faded scar, three inches long, bisects his right jaw, the result of a climbing accident when he was eleven. He still nicks it when he shaves, one of the reasons he sports designer stubble – salt and pepper now, I notice, like his overlong hair. His head is heavy, leonine; when he smiles, his tawny eyes glow like copper. Angry, they darken to the colour of coffee beans. It is impossible to

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know the extent of his charisma, the force of his sexual energy, until he turns it on you.

The phone rings for the third time tonight, making me jump. I reach for it as William stirs, recognizing the hospital number on the caller ID. My heart sinks. The baby seemed stable enough when I left the NICU –

But it's the ER on the other end of the line, not the NICU. And when I end the call a few minutes later, I am no longer a wife, adulterous or otherwise.

I am a widow.

CHAPTER TWO
WILLIAM

Christ Almighty, the poor bastard was only forty-one. Seven years younger than me. And a damn sight fitter, according to Ella: tennis, cycling, jogging down the Thames towpath at weekends. You're always reading about these health nuts keeling over in their running shorts, perfect specimens of physical fitness (apart from the unfortunate fact that they're dead); but it wasn't the running that gave him a heart attack. A fucking virus. Jesus.

It makes you think. Shit, it could happen to anyone; I could be next. Ella says it's not catching, it was just one of those freaky bugs that come out of nowhere, but let's face it, she's a paediatrician, not an immunologist –

I can't get Jackson out of my head. Which is ironic, given I've been screwing his wife on a regular basis for the last eight years and until he checked into the morgue a week ago, I'd barely spared him a thought.

My mobile buzzes. 'Cate,' I exclaim, pleased. An unsolicited phone call from my seventeen-year-old daughter is a rare honour. 'I was just thinking about you –'

'Dad,' she interrupts, 'I think you'd better come home. Quickly.'

The house is cold and silent when I open the front door. Instantly, I smell burning. I throw my briefcase onto the hall table and sprint into the kitchen. Inside the Aga are the charred remains of the steak-and-kidney stew I put in it at six o'clock this morning. I slam my fist against the wall. Dammit, Beth! I may not be Jamie Oliver in the kitchen, but I was up at sparrow's fart to peel bloody carrots in the dark! All I asked you to do was take the fucking casserole out mid-morning. Is that really too much to ask?

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Upstairs, Beth is sitting on the edge of the unmade bed in her shapeless pink flannel nightdress, bare feet dangling over her towelling slippers. As far as I can tell, she hasn't moved since I left her here this morning.

Foreboding fills me. I haven't seen her like this for years, not since the kids were small. I call her name, but she doesn't respond. Even when I crouch down in front of her and say it again, she doesn't show by so much as a flicker that she's heard me.

'Beth, baby, come on, you can't do this to me. You have to try.'

Gently, I take her chin between my thumb and forefinger and turn her head to look at me. She blinks, as if I've shone a light into her eyes.

'I know you're in there, darling. I'm not letting you just give up.'

Her watery blue eyes are expressionless, but still lucid, I note with relief.

'Come on, sweetheart. I know you miss the boys, but they'll be back soon as term's over. Sam has an exeat weekend soon, and Ben will be down from Oxford in just a few more weeks –'

'I want to die,' my wife says.

Fear explodes into anger.

'Death may be better for you, but what about those you leave behind?' I demand. 'What about Ben, and Cate, and Sam? What about me?'

'You'd be better off without me.'

To my shame, I don't contradict her. I've soothed and calmed my troubled wife for twenty-one years, biting my tongue and getting on with things. I may not have kept all my vows, God forgive me, but I've stuck with the one that really mattered: she's my wife, in sickness and in health. Even at her worst, even when she doesn't know her own name. I've loved her as hard as I can, in the best way I know how. But suddenly the well of sympathy has run dry. I'm exhausted from carrying Beth day after day after bloody day. I'm tired of her depression and inertia and sheer relentless fucking misery.

'Pull yourself together, Beth,' I say sharply, and walk out of the room.

When I enter the kitchen, Cate is standing in front of the Aga, warming her bottom as she waits for the dented steel kettle to boil on the hotplate. Her boyfriend, Dan, has his arm wrapped around her waist, his fingers buried deep in the back pocket of her jeans. I want to punch his fucking lights out.

'How's your wife doing, William?' Dan asks concernedly.

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Dan is twenty-three. Too old, apparently, to call me Mr Ashfield. Too old to have his hand tucked into my seventeen-year-old daughter's jeans.

'She's just tired,' I say tersely. 'A good night's sleep, and she'll be fine.'

'Dad, she needs to see Dr Stone,' Cate says. She detaches herself from Dan's grasp and busies herself with the tea. 'She's been getting worse since Christmas. He needs to change the pills again.'

Dan drops a kiss on the top of Cate's head. I know he wants to fuck my daughter.

If he hasn't already.

I pick up Beth's mug of tea, straightening a crooked picture in the stairwell as I go back up the stairs. Cate's right: Beth needs to go back to see Stone. We all know the routine by now. If this doesn't get nipped in the bud, she'll sink back into depression, and then – almost worse – the pendulum will swing the other way. She'll be seized by an unnatural manic energy, rushing around the house frantically tidying and painting and cleaning; until she crashes like a jet slamming into the ground. The last time she had a manic episode she hired a helicopter on my company Amex to the tune of forty-nine thousand pounds. Luckily they were very understanding –

'Beth?' I say, glancing round the empty bedroom.

I put the tea on the bedside table. The bathroom door is closed, and I can hear the sound of running water. Maybe she's feeling better, having a shower.

And then I see the empty Valium bottle on the floor.

'Beth?' I rattle the door handle. 'Beth!'

Christ, she hasn't. In all these years she's never – even at her worst – 'pull yourself together' – oh dear God, not again, not on my watch, oh Jesus, no –

The door gives on the third shove, wood splintering beneath my weight.

At first, I think the bathroom is empty. The claw-footed tub is overflowing, the hot tap still running; I paddle through an inch of water to turn it off, swearing as I nearly go arse over tip on the black-and-white tiles.

For a second, I see her, but I still don't understand.

My wife is lying at the bottom of the bath beneath a foot of water, her blue eyes wide and sightless, and I know instantly she's dead.

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CHAPTER THREE
BETH

I'm not a victim. Dr Stone keeps telling me that. I'm not a victim, I'm a patient.

If anyone's the victim in this, it's William. I know I love him; actually, I'm quite sure I love him rather more than he loves me. The problem is that an awful lot of the time, I can't feel it. Which means I can't show it, either.

It's the drugs. I don't feel much of anything, anymore.

'I'm off now, Beth. You'll be alright, won't you, darling?'

It doesn't even hurt, these days.

'Sweetheart? Cate's spending the day studying at Dan's, but your mother said she'd pop round later this morning to see how you're doing. And I put a steak-and-kidney stew in the Aga for dinner. You just need to get it out at lunchtime.'

If I could choose between another forty-one years of this bleak, soul-destroying emptiness, desolate and stripped of all feeling; or just not being at all –

'Right. I'd better get going. I'll see you later, then. Don't forget the stew.'

I curl into a tight ball on the bed, and watch the brittle winter sky lighten from black to grey. A few flakes of snow whirl against the windowpane. Grey outside, grey inside.

This time of year, it never really seems to get properly light. How can February be the shortest month? It seems to last a year.

Later, when I wake to a knock at the front door, it's already turned to rain. My mother's sharp voice pricks and pokes through the letterbox. I roll myself in the duvet, its protective softness wound around me like a suit of armour.

Four o'clock in the afternoon, and I'm still curled up in the duvet as the squares of glass behind me slowly darken again. I can smell burning. I should have gone downstairs and taken William's stew out of the Aga ages ago, but I didn't want to.

The bedroom door thunks as it hits the wall.

'Mum! You can't still be in bed! Gran rang my mobile and said you hadn't answered the door – oh, for God's sake. I'm calling Dad.'

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If only I could go to sleep one day and never wake up. Everyone thinks I'm wallowing in misery and self-pity out of choice. If I had a pound for every time I've been told to pull myself together.

I'm woken again by William on the stairs; I'd recognize his tread anywhere. I force myself to sit up at last. I knew he wouldn't be pleased Cate called him home. I should have stopped her.

'Beth! Beth, baby, come on, you can't do this to me. You have to try.' He kneels in front of me and turns my chin towards him, so that the light from the hallway gets in my eyes. 'I know you're in there, darling. I'm not letting you just give up.'

Easy for him to say.

'Come on, sweetheart. I know you miss the boys, but they'll be back soon as term's over. Sam has an exeat weekend soon, and Ben will be down from Oxford in just a few more weeks.'

Of course I miss the boys, especially Sam; he's only eight. I didn't want him to board, but William said it'd be good for him, so there wasn't much point in arguing.

If the world could be hit by an asteroid while I sleep. No pain, no mess, no family left to pick up the pieces. I want this to be over, I want to die –

'Death may be better for you, but what about those you leave behind? What about Ben, and Cate, and Sam? What about me?'

I hadn't realized I'd spoken aloud. 'You'd be better off without me –'

'Pull yourself together, Beth,' he snaps, and storms out of the room.

I'm stunned. William never gets cross with me. He soothes and tolerates and understands me. His pity is almost as hard to bear as his indifference. It's such an unexpected pleasure to be treated normally, to be shouted at, that the tears stop as suddenly as they started.

A crumb-strewn plate and an old Valium bottle fall from the tangle of bedclothes onto the floor as I get up and go into the bathroom. Maybe I'd feel better if I had a bath. Clean, at least.

The bathwater is still only tepid when I get in, so I leave the hot tap running for a bit. I love the feeling of being submerged beneath the water, the outside world muffled and far away. I used to be a good swimmer when I was a child. My PE teacher wanted me to compete in the school diving team, but Clara said I'd never cope with the pressure. My sisters used to count how long I could hold my breath under water, I could do it for twice as long as either of –

Suddenly William is looming over me, his face distorted by the bathwater. I gulp a lungful in shock as he grabs my shoulders, yelling my name. My ribs and hips and

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elbows and knees bang against the old iron bathtub as he clumsily yanks me out and onto the floor.

'Jesus Christ, Beth, what are you doing? Come on, Beth, stay with me, don't die, please don't die –'

I'm gasping for breath on the fluffy peach bathmat like a landed fish. I slap his hands off me as he tries to check my pulse.

'William,' I pant, when I'm finally able to speak, 'what on earth is going on?'

CHAPTER FOUR
CATE

'C'mon, Cate. Relax,' Dan murmurs. 'I'm not going to make you do anything you don't want to.'

'I know, but –'

He strokes the side of my cheek with the back of his hand, tilts my head and kisses me softly on the lips. It's like being in a movie; I could do this all day.

Then his hand slides up my calf, and I quickly cross my knees so he doesn't get the wrong idea.

'You're so beautiful, Cate,' Dan says thickly. 'Please, can I just look at you properly? I won't do anything, I swear. I just want to see you. Let me undo your blouse, please. That's all, I promise.'

'I don't –'

'You're not scared, are you?'

'No!'

'At least take off your sweater. That's not going to do any harm, is it?'

I hesitate, then do as he asks. He grabs my hand and puts it on his thing. I'm kind of grossed out, but it's cool at the same time. I can't believe how hard it is under his jeans. I mean, totally hard, like a bone or something. I squeeze it a bit, just to feel, and he rocks back on his heels and closes his eyes and moans.

'You have no idea how sexy you are, Cate. You're driving me crazy.'

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It's getting a bit warm in here, so I don't mind too much when Dan slips my blouse off my shoulders. My pleated grey skirt has somehow got rucked up around my waist, and I hook one bare leg around his hips as he pulls me close, his hands roaming all over my back. God, this is really good. I must stop in a minute, though. I don't want things to go too far. In a minute, I'll stop him.

He leans up on one elbow, staring at me with such intensity I barely recognize him. Then he dips his head to my breast, and I realize with a gasp of shock and pleasure that my bra has somehow come off, and his lips are on my nipple, my naked nipple, I'm naked from the waist up, and his hand is between my thighs, oh God, that's good, I've got to stop now, but that's so good –

'Dan –'

His fingers slip beneath the edge of my cotton panties, and they're stroking me there, he's touching me there! It feels so much better than when I do it, it's hot and wet and heavy and –

'Dan, no –'

Every time he sucks my nipples, I can feel a zing down below, oh, God, this is so good, but I have to stop him, I have to stop –

Suddenly he leans back and unbuckles his jeans. I have a brief glimpse of his thing, red and swollen and totally huge, and suddenly all the warm lovely feelings vanish as if someone's thrown a bucket of cold water over me. I struggle up from the sofa, pulling down my skirt and grabbing my jumper from the floor.

'I can't, Dan. I'm sorry, I just –'

'Are you kidding me? You can't come on to me like that and then stop! I'm not a fucking robot, Cate!' His expression hardens, and he turns and tucks himself away.

'I can't just switch it on and off like a tap, even if you can!'

'I didn't mean –'

All of a sudden, I start to cry. Dan hesitates, then exhales and slowly runs his hand through his hair. 'Look, I'm sorry,' he says, as I sniff miserably. 'I shouldn't have pushed you, I obviously got it wrong. I didn't mean to make you do something you weren't ready for.'

I hiccough. 'You're not going to dump me?'

'You think I'd do that because you won't sleep with me?'

He holds me away from him, his expression serious. 'What kind of man do you think I am? I care about you, Cate. You're beautiful and funny and totally nuts. I love

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being with you. And besides,' he grins, 'I'm depending on you. Who else is going to keep me on the straight and narrow?'

On the way home, I take the short-cut to Clem's, ducking down an alleyway that runs past the railway station. My breath forms smoky plumes as I jog quickly along the path in the dark, imagining rapists and murderers lurking in every shadow. My heart's racing by the time I get to the car-park and turn towards Clem's street, though it slows a bit when I spot a couple snogging in one of those disgusting 4x4s parked near the platform gate (Dad bought one last year; like doesn't he even care about the planet?). At least someone's around if I get jumped by the mad axeman. God, look at them, they're really going for it –

They suddenly separate, and the woman flings open her door, so the light comes on inside. I think I know her. She's got the kind of mad hair you don't forget, like rusty bedsprings – shit! She was the doctor who looked after Sam when he was little! I got dragged along to his annual check-ups every year until he was about five.

I recognized Dad instantly, of course.

'Christ,' Dan mutters. 'Are you sure?'

'Of course I'm sure. I've only lived with him, I don't know, my whole life.'

'You couldn't have made a mistake? Maybe he was just giving her a lift –'

'A lift? From where I was standing, she looked ecstatic.'

'There's probably an innocent –'

'Look, I didn't like get it wrong or imagine it or anything, alright?' I snap. 'Basically, I saw my Dad with his tongue down another woman's throat, and he wasn't giving her mouth-to-mouth, OK?'

'Are you going to tell your Mum?'

'Course I'm not telling her,' I retort. 'You want her to flip out again and try to slash her wrists with the loofah?'

'So what are you going to do?'

She'll never cope on her own if he leaves. Which means I'll be the one stuck looking after her.

I wonder what she's like. Dad's girlfriend. She always seemed OK, but that was before I knew she was shagging my dad. How can she be having an affair with him when she knows he's got kids? Doesn't she care?

Only one way to find out.

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