



Across the aisle from me on the plane is a thin girl with black hair. She could be anywhere from seventeen to twenty-three. And she has *it*: dark eyeliner, fake lashes, a small round tattoo on her lower back, pink headphones, and the permanent pout of someone who is angry at Dad but will fuck any insensitive asshole who reminds her of Dad.

Next to me is a middle-aged woman with large imitation designer sunglasses and a sundress showing milky white cleavage. In just twenty minutes of conversation, and with the artful positioning of a complimentary airline blanket, maybe I could have my hand inside there.

In front of me is a thin redhead with a beat-up face. Probably an alcoholic. Not my type, but I would.

Inside my head, there is a map. And on that map, there is a small LED bulb marking where every reasonably attractive or slightly sexually compelling female is sitting. Before the plane has hit cruising altitude, I have already thought of ways to approach each one, stripped her naked, imagined her blow-job technique, and fucked her in the bathroom or the rental car or her bedroom that night.

This is it: the last time I'm allowed to lust, the last time I'm allowed to even entertain the thought of sleeping with a new woman. And my mind is going crazy. I'm attracted to everyone. Not that I ever wasn't, but this time it hurts somewhere deep—in the core of who I am, of my identity, of my reason for living.

I have nothing with me: no computer, no cell phone, no technology. They are not allowed where I'm going. It feels liberating to be alone with my thoughts—most of which involve debating whether to start a conversation with the aforementioned, possibly jailbait girl in the row to my right or the pock-faced redhead in front of me.

When the plane eases to a stop at the gate, a bespectacled man stands up and makes his way to the aisle. He looks the black-haired girl up and down. He is not hitting on her; he has stared at her too long for that. He's

capturing the image, imprinting it in his memory to save it for later, when he can use it.

Why am I putting myself through this? I wonder. This is normal male behavior. That guy's probably worse than I am.

As I walk through the terminal, I pull a folded piece of paper out of my pocket: *Your driver will meet you as soon as you pass security. He will be wearing a badge with a D, so as not to identify where you are going.*

Suddenly, a guy in his twenties—at least six feet tall, muscular, square jawed, basically the opposite of what I see when I look in the mirror—freezes in front of me. His mouth drops open, like he's seen a ghost. I know what's about to happen, and I want to get rid of him. He is not my driver.

"Oh my god, are you . . ."

For some reason, he can't seem to get the next words out of his mouth. I wait for him to spit it out, but nothing happens.

"Yeah," I tell him.

Silence.

"Well, nice to meet you. I have to go meet a friend." Fuck, that's a lie. I swore to stop lying. Lies just roll off the tongue so much easier than the truth sometimes.

"I read your book," he says.

"Just recently?" I ask, for some reason. Walking away from people who show interest is not one of my strong points. That's why I'm here. Along with the lying.

"No, three years ago."

"That's great." He doesn't look like the kind of guy who ever needed my advice.

"I met my wife because of you. I owe you everything."

"That's great," I say again. I think about the prospect of marrying someone, of spending the rest of my life with her, of not being allowed to fuck anyone else, of her aging and losing interest in sex and me still not being able to fuck anyone else. And the next words just slip out of my mouth: "Are you happy?"

"Oh yeah, totally," he says. "Seriously. I read *The Game* while I was in the Army in Iraq, and it really helped me."

"Do you plan on having kids?" I'm not sure what I'm doing. I think I'm trying to scare him. I want him to show a little fear or hesitancy or doubt, just to prove to myself that I'm not crazy.

“My wife’s actually about to give birth to our son,” he says. “I’m flying home to see her.”

His answer hits me right where it hurts: in my self-esteem. Here I am, incapable of having a relationship and starting a family, and this guy read some book I wrote on picking up women and three years later he’s got his entire life figured out.

I make my excuses and leave him standing there, no doubt thinking, He’s much shorter than I imagined.

On the other side of security, I see a man with a gray ring of hair around his head and a badge with a *D* on it. He must see all kinds of people rolling off the plane, either half dead or wasted or trying hard to pretend they’re a normal adult, which is, I think, what I’m doing.

I feel like an impostor. There are people who need to go to this Level 1 psychiatric hospital because without it they are going to die. They’re going to drink or snort or inject themselves to death.

All I did was cheat on my girlfriend.



## Los Angeles, Six Months Earlier

They say that when you meet someone and feel like it’s love at first sight, run in the other direction. All that’s happened is that your dysfunction has meshed with their dysfunction. Your wounded inner child has recognized their wounded inner child, both hoping to be healed by the same fire that burned them.

In fairy tales, love strikes like lightning. In real life, lightning burns. It can even kill you.

My girlfriend is sitting on the floor of the guesthouse where we live, packing to go with me to Chicago today. It’s her birthday. She’s going to meet my family.

I look at her and appreciate every inch of her, inside and out. “I’m excited, babe,” Ingrid says. She is pure joy, pulling me out of my dark, solipsistic world every morning. She was born in Mexico, but to a German father, and somehow ended up living in America and looking like a petite Russian blonde.

And so she embodies all the elements: the intensity of fire, the strength of earth, the playfulness of water, the delicacy of air.

“I know. Me too.”

I try to push the night before out of my head. There is no evidence of it anywhere; I made sure of that. I showered. I checked the interior of the car. I inspected every item of my clothing for stray hairs. The only thing I can't clean is my conscience.

“Should I bring these shoes?”

“It's only five days. How many pairs do you need?”

Sometimes I get annoyed by how long it takes her to get ready, the amount of clothing she needs to pack for even the shortest trips, the way her high heels prevent us from walking more than a few blocks when we go out. But deep down, I love her femininity. I am a slob and she gives me grace. When I told her last night that I had to go see Marilyn Manson, a musician I'd written a book with, about a new project, I looked into the hazel-green of her eyes and I saw love, happiness, innocence, peace.

Yet still I went through with it.

“So how was last night?” she asks as she struggles with the zipper of her suitcase.

“It was kind of frustrating. We didn't get much work done.” That's for sure.

As she places a small, confident hand on top of the overstuffed bag and pushes the two rows of zipper teeth into contact, I can't help but think of two separate lives being forced together—and how, if just one element pops out of place, everything starts to fall off the tracks.

“Aw, babe, you can sleep on my lap on the plane, if you want.”

She is reliving her mother's relationship with her cheating father. I am reliving my father's secret sex life. We are repeating a pattern handed down by generations of lying, cheating assholes and the poor fools who trust them.

“Thank you,” I tell her. “I love you.” At least I think I love her. But can you really love someone if you just fucked one of her friends in the parking lot of a church, and now six hours later you're lying to her about it? My mind is so clouded with guilt, I don't know anymore. Somehow, I doubt it.

There comes a time in a man's life when he looks around and realizes he's made a mess of everything. He's dug a hole for himself so deep that not only can't he get out, but he doesn't even know which way is up anymore.

And that hole for me is, and has always been, relationships. Not just

because I cheated on Ingrid, but because yet another fairy tale is teetering on the brink of an unhappy ending.

The last fairy tale concluded with my ex locking herself in her apartment with a gun, and yelling that she was going to splatter her brains all over the wall and I shouldn't go to her funeral.

But this one is different. Ingrid isn't crazy, she isn't jealous, she isn't controlling, she's never cheated on me, and she's talented and independent, working in a real estate office by day and designing swimsuits by night. I'm ruining this one all by myself.

And that's because I am the king of ambivalence.

When I'm single, I want to be in a relationship. When I'm in a relationship, I miss being single. And worst of all, when the relationship ends and my captor-lover finally moves on, I regret everything and don't know what I want anymore.

I've gone through this cycle enough times to realize that, at this rate, I'm going to grow old alone: no wife, no kids, no family. I'll die and it will be weeks before the smell gets strong enough that someone finds me. And all the shit I spent my lifetime accumulating will be thrown in the trash so someone else can occupy the space I wasted. I'll have left nothing behind, not even debt.

But what's the alternative?

Most married people I know don't seem to be any happier. One day Orlando Bloom, an actor I'd written a *Rolling Stone* profile about, came over to visit. At the time, he was married to one of the world's most successful and beautiful women, Victoria's Secret supermodel Miranda Kerr, making him one of the most envied men on the planet. And the first thing out of his mouth? "I don't know if marriage is worth it. I don't know why anyone does it. I mean, I want romance and I want to be with someone, but I just don't think it works."

My other married friends haven't fared much better. Some even seem content, but after a little probing they admit to feeling frustrated. Several cope by being unfaithful, others white-knuckle it, many surrender passively to their fate, and a few simply live in denial. Even the rare friends who've remained happy in their marriages admit, when pressed, to being unfaithful at least once.

We expect love to last forever. Yet as many as 50 percent of marriages and even more remarriages end in divorce. Among those who are married,

only 38 percent actually describe themselves as happy in that state. And 90 percent of couples report a decrease in marital satisfaction after having their first child. Speaking of which, more than 3 percent of babies are not actually fathered by the male parent who thinks he did.\*

Unfortunately, it's only getting worse. Thanks to technology, we now have more dating and hook-up options than at any other time in human history, with countless desperate men and women just a click or swipe away, making fidelity—or even committing in the first place—yet more of a challenge. In a recent Pew Research survey, four out of ten people believed that marriage was an obsolete institution.

Maybe, then, the problem isn't just me. Perhaps I've been trying to conform to an outdated and unnatural social norm that doesn't truly meet—and has never met—the needs of both men and women equally.

So I stand here, packing for Chicago, riddled with guilt and confusion, with one foot in the best relationship I've ever had and one foot out of it, wondering: Is it even natural to be faithful to one person for life? And if it is, how do I keep the passion and romance from fading over time? Or are there alternatives to monogamy that will lead to better relationships and greater happiness?

Several years ago, I wrote a book called *The Game* about an underground community of pickup artists I joined in search of an answer to the biggest question plaguing my lonely life at the time: Why don't women I like ever like me back?

In the pages that follow, I attempt to solve a much tougher life dilemma: What should I do *after* she likes me back?

Like love itself, the path to answer this question will be anything but logical. The unintended consequences of my infidelity will lead me to free-love communes, to modern-day harems, and to scientists, swingers, sex anorexics, priestesses, leather families, former child actors, miracle healers, murderers, and, most terrifying of all, my mother. It will challenge and ultimately revolutionize everything I thought I knew about relationships—and myself.

If you're interested in getting more out of this odyssey for yourself, notice the words and concepts that most excite or repel you. Each gut reaction tells a story. It is a story about who you are and what you believe. Because, all too often, the things that we're the most resistant to are precisely what

\*Sources for these and other facts in this book can be found at [www.neilstrauss.com/thetruth](http://www.neilstrauss.com/thetruth).

we need. And the things we're most scared to let go of are exactly the ones we most need to relinquish.

At least, that will be the case with me.

This is the story of discovering that every truth I've desperately clung to, fought for, fucked for, and even loved for is wrong.

Appropriately, it begins in a modern-day insane asylum, sometime before I escaped against medical advice . . .



A hairy man in green hospital scrubs takes my luggage, stretches a pair of latex gloves over his hammy fists, and starts searching for contraband.

"We don't allow books here."

The only other place I've been where books are confiscated is North Korea. Taking away books is a tactic of dictators and others who don't want people to have an original thought. Even in prison, inmates are allowed to have books.

But this is my punishment, I tell myself. I'm here to be retrained, to learn how to be a decent human being. I've hurt people. I deserve to be in this hospital, this prison, this asylum, this convalescent home for weak men and women who can't say no.

They treat all addictions here: alcohol, drugs, sex, food, even exercise. Too much of anything can be a bad thing. Even love.

Their specialty is love addiction.

But I am not a love addict. I wish I were. That sounds much more socially acceptable. There's probably a special place in heaven for love addicts, along with all the other martyrs.

The attendant drops my nail clippers, tweezers, razor, and razor blades into a manila envelope. "I'm going to have to take these too."

"Can I shave first? I didn't have time to shave this morning."

"New arrivals can't use razors for three days while on suicide watch. After that, you need your psychiatrist's permission."

"But how can you commit suicide with nail clippers?" I'm not very good with rules. That's another reason I'm here. "Mine don't even have a file attached."

He is silent.

You can't fix most problems with rules, any more than you can with laws. They're too inflexible. They break. Common sense is flexible. And I'm clearly in a place devoid of it. "If I wanted to kill myself, I'd just use my belt. And you didn't take that."

I say it with a smile, to show I'm not angry. I just want to let him know that this system doesn't work. He looks me up and down, says nothing, then writes something in my folder. I'm never getting that razor back.

"Come with me," insists a green-smocked woman—rail thin and sinewy, with unkempt blond hair and sun-damaged skin. She introduces herself as a nurse technician and leads me to a private room.

She wraps a blood pressure cuff around my arm. "We need to take your vitals four times a day for the next three days," she says. Her eyes are dull, the words mechanical. This is what she does all day, every day.

"Why is that?" I ask. Too many questions. I can tell they don't like them here. But I'm just trying to understand. This isn't how I thought things were supposed to go. When I visited rehab to see a rock guitarist I was writing a book with, it seemed like a cross between a country club and overnight camp.

"We get a lot of people withdrawing and we want to make sure they're going to be okay," she explains. She listens to my pulse and lets me know my blood pressure is high.

Of course it's fucking high, I want to tell her. I've never been so uncomfortable in my life. You're taking away all my shit and treating me like I'm going to die. Withdrawing from sex isn't going to kill me.

But I stay quiet. And I submit. Like a good cheater.

She gives me a pager I'm supposed to wear at all times, in case they need me in the nursing station. Then she thrusts one form after another in front of me—patient rights, privacy, liability, and the rules. More fucking rules. One paragraph forbids me from having sex with any patient, nurse, or staff member. The next says that patients may not wear bikinis, tank tops, or shorts—and must wear bras at all times.

"So I have to put on a bra?" I joke, futilely trying once more to show how stupid their rules are.

"It's kind of silly," the nurse concedes, "but we have sex addicts in here."

The words escape from her mouth with scorn and fear, as if these sex addicts are not normal patients but creepy predators to beware of. And suddenly I realize that the alcoholics and junkies have nothing on me: They



harm only their own bodies. I am after the bodies of others. I'm the worst of the worst. Other addicts can't find drugs in rehab, but my temptation is here. It is everywhere. And anyone in flirting distance must remain vigilant, lest I prey on them.

"Do you have any suicidal thoughts?" she asks.

"No."

She clicks a box on the computer and a form appears titled *Promise Not to Commit Suicide*.

She thrusts a small digital pad and a stylus toward me and asks me to sign the form.

"What are you going to do if I kill myself? Kick me out for lying?"

She says nothing, but I notice her dig the nail of her index finger into her thumb. I think I'm annoying her. It's the questions. The fucking questions. They don't like them here. It's because questions are powerful: The right question can expose the flaws in the system.

But I sign. And I submit. Like a good cheater.

She looks over my file on the computer, sees something that evidently surprises her, then turns the monitor away from me and quickly types a few words. I've only been here twenty minutes, and on relatively good behavior considering, and I'm already in the doghouse. And that's fine with me, because so far I hate the whole process. This is not about making me better. This is about covering their own asses from lawsuits, so they can tell the victim's family, "Well, he promised us he wouldn't hang himself. See, we have his signature right here, so it's not our fault if he lied to us."

"Do you have any homicidal thoughts?" she asks.

"No." And in that moment, I have a homicidal thought. It's like saying, "Don't think of a pink elephant."

She moves to the next question. "What are you here for?"

"Cheating."

She says nothing. I think about that word. It sounds lame. I'm in a fucking mental hospital because I couldn't say no to a new sex partner. So I add the other reason I'm there: "And I guess to learn how to have a healthy relationship."

I think of Ingrid, whose heart I broke, whose friends threatened to kill me, who never did anything wrong but love me.

The nurse looks up to face me. It is the first time she's made eye contact.

I see something soften. I'm no longer a pervert. I've said the magic R word: *relationship*.

Her lips part and moisten; her whole demeanor is different now. She actually wants to help me. "Of course," she says, "the first part of that is finding someone to date who's healthy."

"I found that person," I sigh. "She's totally healthy. That's what made me realize it's just me."

She smiles sympathetically and continues looking through my intake folder. I ask her if she thinks I'm really an addict. "I'm not an addiction specialist," she says. "But if you're cheating on your relationship, if you're visiting porn sites, or if you're masturbating, that's sex addiction."

She opens a drawer, removes a red square of paper, and writes my first name and last initial on it in black marker. Then she slips it into a small plastic sleeve and loops a long piece of white string through it. It's the ugliest necklace I've ever seen.

"You're in red two," she says. "You're required to wear your badge at all times."

"What does red two mean?"

"The tags are color coded. Red is for sex addicts. And the red two group is in therapy with"—she pauses and flashes a brief, uncomfortable smile—"Joan."

I can't tell whether it's fear or pity in her expression, but for some reason the name fills me with a crawling dread.

She then picks up a large poster board from the floor and holds it on top of the desk, facing me. There are eight huge words on it:

JOY  
PAIN  
LOVE  
ANGER  
PASSION  
FEAR  
GUILT  
SHAME

"This is called a check-in," she says. "You'll be required to check in four times a day and report which emotions you're feeling. Which ones are you experiencing right now?"

I scan the display for crawling dread, for utter worthlessness, for total confusion, for intense regret, for rule-hating frustration, for the impulse to jump up and run away and change my name to Rex and move to New Zealand forever.

“I can’t find my emotions on the list.”

“These are the eight basic emotions,” she explains with practiced patience. “Every emotion belongs in one of these categories. So select the ones you feel the most right now.”

I don’t get this. I feel like someone just made this shit up. It’s completely arbitrary. It makes me feel . . .

“Anger.”

She types it in my file. I am now officially institutionalized. I feel another emotion coming on.

“What’s the difference between guilt and shame?” I ask.

“Guilt is just about your behavior. Shame is about who you are.”

“And shame.” Lots of shame.

She leads me back to the reception desk, where I see a woman with her arm in a blue fiberglass cast being led out of a nursing station: another new arrival. She has pasty skin, blue-black hair, lots of piercings, and the look of a vampire who seduces men to their doom. And I’m instantly attracted.

From the other direction, an even more alluring woman, with long blond hair pouring out of a pink baseball cap, saunters to the reception desk. She’s wearing a tight black T-shirt that clings to every contour of her body. And I think what I always think, what every man always thinks. What was puberty for if not to think these thoughts? What is testosterone for if not to feel a sudden rush of chemicals priming the neuroreceptors in the medial preoptic area of the brain right now, impelling me forward to action?

“What are you here for?” I ask the blonde. Her tag is blue.

“Love addiction,” she replies.

Perfect. I ask if she wants to get dinner.

Check-in: guilt.

And passion.



My roommate also has a red tag around his neck. As soon as I walk through the door, he looks me up and down, and instantly a wave of inferiority washes over me. He's tan and muscular; I'm not. His face is chiseled; mine is soft and weak. He was the most valuable player in a soccer championship, if his T-shirt is to be believed; I was always picked last for sports teams in school.

"I'm Adam," he says and crushes my hand in his. He speaks with confidence; my voice is nervous and fast.

"Neil." I extricate my hand. "So what are you in for?" I ask with forced ease. If I looked like Adam, I would have had girlfriends—or at least some sort of sexual contact—in high school and probably wouldn't be lusting after every woman on the street, on the plane, in rehab, in a fifty-yard radius of wherever I am. I'd have some fucking self-esteem.

"Neil, I'll tell you." He sits down on his bed and sighs. "I'm here for the same reason you are, the same reason every guy is: I got caught."

Or maybe I still wouldn't have self-esteem. Suddenly, I like him. He speaks my language.

The room is sparse: three small cots, three locking wardrobes, and three cheap plastic alarm clocks. I claim a bed and a closet as Adam tells his story. The bed is so low to the ground that his knees are almost at his chest.

Adam is a hardworking, God-fearing, patriotic American man clipped right out of a 1950s magazine ad for aftershave. Married his college sweetheart, bought a small house in Pasadena, sells insurance, has two kids and a dog, goes to church on Sundays.

"But my wife," he's saying, "she doesn't take care of herself. She lies around the house all day and does nothing. I come home from work and she just sits there reading a magazine. I'll ask if she wants to hear the five-minute version of my day and she'll say, 'No thanks.' She doesn't even have dinner ready for the kids." He drops his chin into his hands and takes a deep breath into his probably perfect athlete's lungs. "It's not that I want her to be a housewife or anything, but I'm exhausted. So I'll make dinner for everyone and she doesn't even clean up. You know, Neil, I call her every afternoon and tell her I love her. I send her flowers. I do everything to show her I care."

"But do you care or are you just doing a duty?"

“That’s just it.” He anxiously twists his wedding band. “I play soccer and help run the local leagues, and there’s this woman who started coaching one of the teams, and there was something there between us. It was maybe seven months before anything happened, but when it did, let me tell you, Neil, I’m not kidding, it was the best sex I’ve ever had. It was real passion and it developed into real love. But then my wife hired a private eye and that was the end of that.”

Perhaps marriage is like buying a house: You plan to spend the rest of your life there, but sometimes you want to move—or at least spend a night in a hotel. “So if you were so happy with this other woman and so unhappy with your wife, why didn’t you just get divorced?”

“It’s not that easy. I have a mature, established relationship with my wife. And we have children, and you have to think about them.” He pushes himself off the bed and rises to his feet. “Wanna keep talking while we jog?”

I look at his legs, built by some super genetic stock and, probably, by a strict dad who loved him only when he scored goals. It would take me four steps to keep up with just one of his.

“That’s all right. I have dinner plans.”

“See you around, then.” He starts to leave the room, then turns back. “Anyone warn you about Joan yet?”

“Joan?” And then I remember.

“She runs our group. A real ballbuster. You’ll see.”

And off Adam goes—healthy, wholesome, and fucked.

In the cafeteria, there’s no sugar or caffeine, just food that won’t make anyone high. At a table in the corner, seven women with eating disorders sit with a staff counselor, who makes sure they swallow their allotted calories and don’t purge in the bathroom.

So far I haven’t seen any women with red tags. Evidently, women have eating disorders, men have sex addiction. I suppose both share the same obsession: women’s bodies.

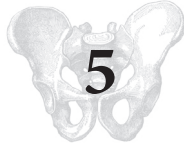
I sit down next to the love addict, who’s with the broken-armed vampire from reception. Turns out they’re roommates. The love addict introduces herself as Carrie; the vampire as Dawn, an alcoholic and indiscriminate drug fiend. Whenever Dawn needs more sugar-free dessert or caffeine-free coffee, Carrie gets it for her, until the counselor from the eating table walks over.

“Stop getting food for other people,” he reprimands her. “That’s codependency, and it’s against the rules here. No more caretaking! Got it?”

After he leaves, Carrie gives me a helpless look. “But her arm’s broken! What am I supposed to do?”

“You’re enabling my cast addiction,” Dawn jokes. And we laugh as if everything’s normal. But as we do, I look down and see the red tag dangling over my solar plexus like a scarlet letter. And I start to falter, to get nervous, to wonder if they’ve noticed that, of all the people to talk to here, I’ve chosen them—the youngest ones, the most attractive ones, the only two I shouldn’t be sitting with.

If they don’t know yet what this red badge means, they will know soon: Keep away. This man is a pervert.



On a bulletin board outside the reception area, there’s a list of twelve-step meetings taking place that night: Alcoholics Anonymous, Narcotics Anonymous, Sex and Love Addicts Anonymous, Overeaters Anonymous, Gamblers Anonymous, Crystal Meth Anonymous, Co-Dependents Anonymous. A menu of dysfunctions to choose from.

I’ve never been to any of these meetings, so I choose the most relevant: Sex and Love Addicts Anonymous. It’s in the patient lounge, which serves primarily as a library of tabletop puzzles to keep obsessive-compulsive patients busy wasting their lives. In a circle of couches and chairs at the far end of the room, there’s a group of three men and three women, including Carrie, led by a sad but dignified gray-haired man with a binder open in front of him. He looks like a newscaster who’s fallen on hard times.

“My name is Charles, and I’m a codependent depressive sex addict with PTSD and OCD,” he tells the group.

“Hi, Charles.”

“I was treated for sex addiction ten years ago and then relapsed two months ago. Because I didn’t want to raise kids around my addiction, I’ve passed up the chance to have children with my wife. We’re both too old now, and I really regret that. And I’m scared for her to come for family week, because I don’t want to lose her.”

When he's finished, he looks to Carrie. She's changed into another tight T-shirt. This one says DAMAGED GOODS on it.

"My name is Carrie, and I'm a love addict and trauma survivor." Hi, Carrie. "I just got here today. I spent the last two years chasing after an abusive guy who wasn't even interested in me. If a guy gives me just a little bit of attention, I get obsessed. I don't feel pretty, and I see him as a challenge. And because I want approval and love so much, I have sex before I should—and a lot of times when I shouldn't at all."

The thought occurs before I can stop it: These groups are a great place to meet women. Carrie is sitting here divulging the exact strategy by which she can be seduced. There's nothing a man with low self-esteem loves more than a beautiful woman who doesn't know she's beautiful.

I need to control my mind. I suppose that's why I'm here.

Next up is a man in his early fifties: gray hair, gray beard, slight belly, red cheeks, like a skinnier, sex-addicted Santa Claus. He stares at his stomach and slowly, reluctantly tells his story. "I started out just going to strip clubs, but then I went to Tijuana and found this whorehouse and started going there all the time."

He sucks in a lungful of air like it's cigarette smoke, and lets out the saddest sigh I've ever heard. "And I got an STD." He pauses, as if considering whether to share the rest of the story, then squeezes his eyes shut for a moment and shakes his head side to side. "And I haven't told my wife about it yet." He waits for a reaction, but it's so quiet you could hear a syringe drop. "I'm going to have her come for family week and tell her then, I guess. Twenty-five years of marriage, and the whole house of cards is about to come tumbling down."

He looks like his neck is in a guillotine and he's waiting for the blade to fall. No one seems to have much of a problem with cheating here, just with getting caught. Many a man has shot himself in the head rather than face up to the consequences of what he's done in his secret life.

Yet the consequences are rarely death, violence, or prison. The consequences are that other people will know about it, and they'll have feelings and emotions about it that he can't control. Santa Claus's wife isn't going to kill him. She's just going to be really, really, really pissed off. Lying is about controlling someone else's reality, hoping that what they don't know won't hurt you.

Suddenly I notice that everyone's eyes are on me.

“My name is Neil.”

“Hi, Neil,” they all echo flatly.

And then I hesitate. If I check in as a sex addict, that could ruin my chances with Carrie.

But I’m here to ruin my chances with Carrie. I’m here to ruin my chances with everyone. If I have sex in rehab, then I’m really doomed.

But Carrie aside, am I even a sex addict? I’m a fucking man. Men like to have sex. That’s what we do. Put a beautiful woman in a tight dress in a bar on a Saturday night, and it’s like throwing raw meat into a den of wolves.

But I ate the meat while I was in a relationship. And I lied to and hurt someone who loves me, or loved me—I’m not sure which anymore. I suppose that’s what addicts do: They want something so badly, they’re willing to hurt others to get it.

“And I’m a sex and love addict.”

Okay, so I softened it a little.

Everyone is listening, no one is judging. They’ve all got their own problems. “I never thought I’d be in a place like this. But I made some bad decisions and I cheated on the woman I love. So I guess I’m here to find out why I’d do something like that and hurt her so much. And because I want to become healthy enough to have a committed relationship, hopefully with her. I don’t want to end up destroying a marriage and traumatizing my children because I cheated.”

Santa Claus shakes his head and his eyes well up with tears.

I stop there. I decide not to mention the other option I’m debating: to just say, “Fuck it, this is my nature,” and not get in another monogamous relationship, to be free to go out with who I want, when I want.

Since adolescence, we’ve been trained as men—by our friends, by our culture, by our biology—to desire women. It seems unreasonable to expect us to just shut it off forever once we get married. Legs are long, breasts are soft, and forever is a long time.

After everyone else shares, Charles asks if anyone is attending their first meeting. I raise my hand and he passes around a coin for me. I’ve seen friends who were junkies get these coins for sobriety and treat them like Olympic gold medals. Now I’ve got one. I look at it. It means nothing to me, except that today I’ve become one of them. One day sober.

Never in my lifetime did I think I’d be a patient in a place like this. In fact, I always thought that I was normal, that I was lucky to have parents



who stayed together and never beat me, that my father's secret had nothing to do with me, that I had no use or time for therapists, that I was a journalist who wrote about other people's problems. I'm not sure what made me finally realize I was the one who was crazy.

Maybe it was Rick Rubin.



## Pacific Ocean, Five Months Earlier

So let me get this straight: You love your girlfriend, but you went and had sex with someone else?

Yes.

And you knew that would hurt her, so you lied to her about it?

Yes.

Well, look on the bright side: If she finds out and breaks up with you, you're not really in a relationship anyway. With all the lying, you've been in your own world the whole time.

*Rick and I are paddleboarding in the Pacific Ocean. He's one of the best music producers in the world, and for some reason he's taken me under his wing. At first I thought he befriended me so I would write about him in Rolling Stone, but I soon realized that nothing could be further from the truth. He doesn't like to be written about, to go to parties, or to be in any situation outside his comfort zone. Yet at the same time, he has no problem telling bands like U2 that some new song they've recorded sucks.*

So do you think I should just tell her what happened?

Of course. If you'd committed to always telling her the truth in the first place, you would have thought twice before cheating on her. So start now, and maybe it's not too late to include her in your relationship.

I don't think I can do it. It would hurt her too much.

Well, was it worth it?

Definitely not.

*Every other day for the last year, Rick and I have paddled from Paradise Cove to Point Dume together and talked about our lives. He's older than me but faster,*

*always a few strokes ahead. Shirtless, with a long gray beard, he looks like some kind of water mystic leading a young acolyte.*

*Our paddles together are a far cry from my conversations with Rick a few years ago. Back then, he was 135 pounds heavier and rarely got off his couch. Every movement seemed like hard labor to him. Now, every day he's either working out, paddleboarding, or trying some new exercise regimen. I've never seen anyone go through such a rapid transformation. And today, I suppose he's trying to help me do the same.*

Do you know what kind of people can't control their behavior, even when they don't enjoy that behavior anymore?

Weak people?

Addicts.

I don't think I'm an addict. I'm just a guy. It's not like I do this all the time.

Spoken like a true crackhead. Didn't you just get finished telling me that you lie to the people you love to get your fix, that you don't even get high from it anymore but still do it?

Yes. But what if Ingrid just isn't the right person for me? If she was, maybe I wouldn't cheat. She gets on my nerves sometimes, and she can be really stubborn.

You had the same kind of complaints about your last girlfriend. When things get hard for you, you start blaming the person you're with. None of this has anything to do with her. Just you. Can you see that?

I don't know.

*He rolls his eyes.*

*Sometimes I feel like I'm an experiment of Rick's, that he gets off on persuading people to do the exact opposite of what they enjoy, that this is a sadistic attempt to see if he can make the guy who wrote The Game let go of the game.*

I will go as far as to say you probably have never experienced a true connection, sexually or otherwise, before in your life. Rehab may be exactly what you need to cure your fear.

What fear?

That in a healthy monogamous relationship, you're not enough for the person you're with.

*Either that or he's actually trying to help me.*

I'll have to think about that.

You don't have time to think. If you ever want to be truly happy in this lifetime, you have to recognize that you're using sex like a drug to fill a hole. And that hole is your self-esteem. Deep down, you feel unlovable. So

you try to escape from that feeling by conquering new women. And when you finally go too far and hurt Ingrid, all it's going to do is reinforce your original belief that you're not worthy of love.

*As he speaks, Rick appears almost messianic. His eyes burn brightly and he seems to be receiving the truth from some higher place, a place I've never been. I've seen him get like this before—and when I ask him later to repeat what he said, he usually can't remember.*

I see what you're saying. But I also just like trying new things. I love traveling, eating at different restaurants, and meeting new people. Sex is the same: I like getting to know different women, experiencing what they're like in bed, meeting their friends and family, and having the adventures and memories.

Fill the hole and have sex when you're whole, then see how that feels.

Maybe you're right. It wouldn't hurt to try that.

There's a place I know where you can go for sex addiction. It's a month-long program. If you go now—and write Ingrid from rehab, tell her the truth, and explain that you're dealing with your problem—I think she'd forgive you.

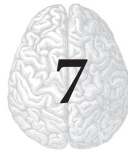
I can't go now. I have a couple of really big deadlines coming up.

If you got hit by a car today and you were in the hospital for a month, you wouldn't miss out on anything by not being able to write during that time. That excuse is just the illness having free rein with you. Nothing's going to change until you take deliberate and committed action to change it.

*I promise myself that I'll be faithful to Ingrid from now on, that I'll make sure she never finds out what I did, and that I'll prove to Rick I'm not an addict. Yet at the same time, there's a voice inside me, telling me that somewhere out there, like Bigfoot or the Loch Ness Monster, there are smart, attractive, and stable women who want commitment without requiring sexual exclusivity.*

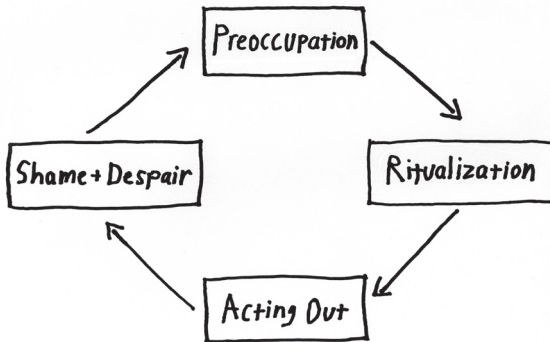
Listen, there's a lot of truth in what you're saying. And I'm going to think about it and try to do the right thing. But I really don't think I'm a sex addict. It's not like I'm blowing all my money on hookers or fondling altar boys or anything.

Maybe you're not ready yet. Like a junkie, you need to hit rock bottom first.



There are ten chairs pushed against the side and back walls of the room, each filled with a broken man, including my roommate Adam. Charles, who led the twelve-step meeting the previous night, is here. So is Santa Claus, slumped in his chair, his forehead creased with stress, his eyes cinched tight. He's in the room in body only. His mind is elsewhere, suffering. Against the front wall is a rolling chair, a desk, and a file cabinet filled with the sins of countless sex addicts.

On the wall is a large chart titled "The Addiction Cycle," with four terms—*preoccupation*, *ritualization*, *acting out*, and *shame & despair*—arranged in a circle. Arrows point from one word to the next in an endless loop.



As I'm studying it, the door swings open and a tall woman with a pear-shaped body walks in. She has brown hair, unwashed and pulled back in a tight bun. She's wearing a loose-fitting flowered top over brown slacks and flat shoes. The corners of her lips are pulled slightly downward in a permanent frown. She looks the group over, careful not to make eye contact with anyone or acknowledge his individuality. Whatever the opposite of sex is, she embodies it.

She lands with a thud in the rolling chair. Sifting through a stack of manila folders, she shows no tenderness, no humanity, no humor. She is our doctor and judge, the stern mother we've been fucking women to try to escape from and the bitter wife who's caught us.

Her name is Joan. And her mere presence ripples through the flesh of each man in the room like a violent chill.

“Have you completed your assignment?” she asks a man in his mid-thirties. He’s thin and blond, with a sweet, boyish face, ruddy cheeks, and the beginnings of an oddly incongruous potbelly.

“Yes,” he says nervously. “Should I read it?” His red name tag identifies him as Calvin.

“Please.” There’s no warmth or caring in her voice, only authority and a drip of condescension. In fact, everything she does and says is so measured that her personality seems artificial, like a mask she puts on before walking into a room to face ten male sex addicts. And she fears that if she drops it, if she gives up any ground, she’ll lose control of these predatory animals she must tame and civilize.

“These are the ways in which my sexual addiction has hurt my life,” Calvin begins. “I lost my house and my brother. I booked a trip around the world with him and snuck away to see escorts in almost every city. I’ve spent a total of a hundred and twenty-five thousand dollars over the course of my life on escorts.”

“Are you counting everything you’ve spent?”

“I think so.” He braces himself as if he’s about to be attacked.

“Did you include your Internet bill?”

“No.”

“Do you use the Internet to find escorts?”

“Yes.”

“Then include your Internet bill. And your phone bill, if you called any of these women you dehumanized.” She spits out the last word like a preacher damning him to hell. “Include the money you spent on taxis to see these women and the money you spent on condoms and the entire cost of any trip where you saw them.”

“Okay, then maybe it’s two hundred and fifty thousand?”

A quarter of a million dollars is still not enough for Joan. As she pushes him to add up every penny even peripherally involved in the pursuit of sex, I think about how I’ve made my living off my so-called sex addiction. My sex addiction pays for my phone, rent, and health insurance. It pays for breakfast, lunch, and dinner; for movies, books, and the computer I’m writing on; for socks, underwear, and shoes. Fuck, I couldn’t afford to be here getting treatment without it.

When I look back on my childhood, I see a malnourished nerd wearing cheap black-rimmed plastic glasses, too big for my little face yet too small for my gigantic ears. And I see greasy brown hair chopped awkwardly short—at my request. I hated my curls. Everyone else had straight hair and I wanted to fit in. Even my own mother called me a follower.

My losing streak continued not just through high school—where my junior prom date left the dance with another guy and my longest interactions with attractive women were during haircuts—but through college and my twenties. I sat on the sidelines, watching other people have fun. Eventually I made that a full-time job and started writing profiles of musicians for a living. When things got particularly lonely in the long droughts between girlfriends and I craved female touch, I'd go to an Asian massage parlor. And even there, I got the feeling they were making fun of my awkwardness behind my back.

But one day, everything changed. I embedded myself with the world's greatest self-proclaimed ladies' men, hoping to turn my losing streak around. After living with them and traveling the world with them for two years, I finally developed the confidence to talk to women I was attracted to and, for the first time in my life, the ability to attract them to me. The book I wrote about my education at the hands of these unlikely Lotharios became so infamous that it eclipsed everything I'd done before. And so my pursuit of sex didn't destroy my life, it made my career.

How frustrating, then, to find myself in rehab some five years later, trying to unlearn everything I've spent so much time and energy learning.

"Do you realize that you're harming these women when you use their bodies to masturbate with?" Joan admonishes Calvin. She senses he's on the verge of tears, then tries to bring him over the edge. "They don't care about you. These are hurt and abused women. And you're reenacting their childhood trauma. You are their father, their first boyfriend, the predator who raped away their innocence."

And that's it. Calvin is done. His head rolls down and he covers his eyes with his palms as the tears spill out. Victorious, Joan takes a verbal lap around the room, asking different patients to report on what their sexual addiction has cost them, breaking down each of their defenses, stripping them of the last vestige of ego and pride they've retained from any affair or adventure or transaction.

When a thin, laid-back patient with thick black hair and a cratered face mentions a girl he had an affair with, Joan recoils and spends ten minutes lecturing him on the use of the g-word. “As a therapist, when I hear the word *girl*, I have to automatically assume that you’re talking about a minor. And I’m obliged to report that.”

The air in the room thickens with confusion and discomfort. Finally, the accused replies, “I’m a sex addiction therapist also. I’ve been practicing for fifteen years. And I have never heard that interpretation of the word *girl* before in my life.”

Joan raises her head like a cobra about to strike: “If I hear you use that word again, I will report you. And you will not make it to your sixteenth year as a CSAT.”

That shuts him up. Another man down.

A CSAT is a Certified Sex Addiction Therapist, a designation invented by Patrick Carnes, the Johnny Appleseed of sex addiction. While working with sex offenders in the seventies, he began to view sex as an addiction like alcohol and he believed it could be treated with the same twelve-step program. So in the decades that followed, he started lecturing, writing books, setting up treatment centers, studying thousands of sex fiends and their families, and crusading to get psychiatrists to recognize sex addiction as a mental disorder.

On the wall over Joan’s desk, there’s a small framed photograph of Saint Carnes himself in a majestic dark suit and striped tie, forehead shining below his receding hairline like the halo of an angel, wedding-band-consecrated left hand resting in the foreground. He’s smiling crookedly and looking down beatifically on the room of sex addicts prostrate before him.

Except for Calvin, who’s never had a serious girlfriend and is here because he got a Brazilian hooker pregnant, every other sinner seems to be in the room for cheating—some regularly for decades, others once or twice. And so they come here, trying to work off the sins of the flesh and hoping Saint Carnes can perform a miracle and save the family that is both their greatest achievement and their greatest burden.

Looking at abject Adam and scared Santa Claus and penitent Charles, I think: I need to fix this problem now. Because otherwise I’ll be right back here like them after I’m married, fighting to keep my family together.

When Joan releases us, I stand up to head to the cafeteria, but she stops me. “You need to stay and sign some paperwork.” She makes no eye contact.

Instead, she turns to her computer and pulls up my file, then studies it carefully.

“So how long have you been taking Zoloft?” she asks.

“I’ve never taken Zoloft.”

“It says here in your file that you do.”

“Well, that’s probably a mistake. I’ve never taken any psychiatric medication in my life.”

“So you don’t take Zoloft?” Her eyebrows rise incredulously and she types into my file: “Denies taking Zoloft.”

It’s interesting how someone will believe a document more than they’ll believe a human being—even though the words didn’t get on the document by themselves. For the rest of my life and even after it, whenever people dig through my records, they’ll think I have a chemical mood imbalance because of this hack.

She closes my file, then calls up another document. I look over her shoulder. The bold print at the top of the screen freezes my heart: **CELIBACY/ABSTINENCE CONTRACT.**

Evidently I’m about to become a priest.

She reads it sternly.

#### **I WILL REFRAIN FROM THE FOLLOWING:**

- Masturbation
- Implicit or explicit pornographic material
- Flirtatious, seductive, romantic, or suggestive comments or behavior
- Seductive attire
- Sexually overt or covert contact with another person or myself
- Secretive sexual fantasizing: I will report objectifying, fantasizing, or obsessing to appropriate staff members
- And cross-dressing.

“This contract is effective for twelve weeks,” she informs me.

“But I’m only supposed to be here for four weeks.”

She fixes her eyes on mine. Her pupils are brown and glassy, with as much empathy as a snail shell. “This is for your own benefit. It takes three



months for your brain to return to normal after all the imbalances caused by the constant high of sex.”

“So I can’t even have sex when I go home?”

“Not if you want to recover.”

I sign the contract. Like a good cheater.

“Thank you,” she says dryly, waving me out of the room.

Check-in: the feeling your balls get when you jump in a really cold lake.



## San Francisco, One Month Earlier

I’m standing at the baggage claim in San Francisco when the call comes. I’ve just pulled my roller bag off the carousel.

“I got an email from Juliet,” Ingrid says.

The blood drains out of my face and my bones feel hollow. Something in me has just been cut loose. It is fear. It is panic. It is sadness. It is guilt. It is pain. It is every bad emotion at once. I’m as light as cotton, yet I don’t have the strength to move.

“Is there anything you need to tell me?” she asks. I can hear the hurt in her voice, the shock, the disbelief. Her world has just come apart at the seams. What she thought was golden thread has turned out to be polyester. She needs me to say it’s not true. And, more than anything, I want to give her one more soothing lie to keep the fabric of our reality stitched together.

I open my mouth to speak and nothing comes out. I can’t compound the injury with one more deception. But I can’t bring myself to admit the truth either. I have only one other option.

“Can I call you back?” If truth is not on my side, at least time can be. “My plane was delayed and I’m late to my talk.”

I’m speaking at a big tech company about my books. And right now, it seems so fucking unimportant, all this writing, all this time spent hunched over a glowing screen, all this convincing myself that any of it matters. People are what matter, not things.

And I have destroyed the person who matters most to me.

Just the night before, Ingrid texted me a photograph. She was on stage

in a bar, holding an immense trophy aloft, a huge silly grin on her face as a crowd applauded her. Somehow, she'd won an annual rock-paper-scissors championship against a hundred other people, even though she'd barely played the game before. Looking at that image, I felt as excited as if she'd won an Oscar. That's my girlfriend. She's a champion. She can figure anything out and crush it.

Well, now she's figured me out.

As I'm driving to the lecture, my heart pounding and mind racing, Ingrid forwards the message she received from Juliet. I glance at it, see "we had sex in his car, in my bed, and in my shower," and can't read anymore. All I can imagine is how Ingrid must have felt when she read those words.

This pause, this procrastination of the inevitable, is like the fuse on a bomb. I see it burning and I'm scrambling to find a way to extinguish it before it reaches the detonator. But there's too much evidence Juliet can provide: dates, times, texts, techniques. I don't know what made me believe I could get away with it or why I even put myself and Ingrid in this position. The first time I did it out of desire. The second time I did it out of guilt. The third time I did it out of fear: She'd threatened to tell Ingrid. Then I didn't do it the fourth time.

And that's when the gates of hell opened.

At a generic office building, a generic man in a generic shirt leads me to a generic room filled with more than a hundred generic employees. I take a deep breath and spend the next hour telling them to enjoy their lives and be their best selves, while in my chest I feel my life caving in.

When I get to my hotel room, I plug my dying cell phone into the wall. The cord is short, so I have to lie on the floor beneath the desk.

"I just got off the phone with Juliet," Ingrid says when she answers. "She told me about your birthmark." My birthmark is a splotch of raised red bumps, kind of like the six on a die, on the left side of my ass. When I was ten, I read the book *The Omen* and became convinced that my birthmark was the mark of the Antichrist. Ingrid had a more positive interpretation: She once took a thin black marker and connected the bumps like islands on a pirate treasure map, with an X at the end.

"I also talked to Luke," she says. Luke is a friend of ours. Juliet is his ex-girlfriend. "He's really upset."

"I know, I know, I can explain," I weakly protest.

“Neil, I am so hurt and in shock. I’m leaving. And I don’t want to see you again. I don’t want to talk to you again. That’s it.”

Then she hangs up and I collapse crying on the floor. Just sobbing out loud. Tears drip out of my eyes and my stomach heaves. I fucking blew it. I blew it. I blew it.

And then the texts come: Luke says he’s going to punch me in the face when I get home. Ingrid’s girlfriends want me dead. And I’m worried that her stepbrothers are going to beat the shit out of me.

Not that I don’t deserve to be disfigured. At least my outside can match how I feel inside. It’s not just the pain of losing Ingrid, it’s the pain of knowing I’ve hurt her. In this life, we don’t meet many people who truly love us, who accept us for who we are, who put us before themselves. Maybe a parent or two if we’re lucky, perhaps a couple of previous partners. So what kind of person rewards someone’s love with lies, betrayal, and pain?

A selfish person. A coldhearted person. A thoughtless person. An asshole. A liar. A cheater. A guy who thinks with his dick. Me.

As soon as I regain a semblance of control over my motor functions, the next call I make is to Rick to ask for the name of the program he recommended.



As I walk through a drab yellow hallway to the cafeteria, I feel a pain in my groin, a psychologically induced ache. I’ve signed my soul to Joan and turned my dick into an appendage, doomed to dangle desolately between my legs and just piss occasionally.

“Let me ask you,” I nudge Charles, joining him in the food line. “Do you think it’s male nature that makes us want to sleep with other people or is it really an addiction?”

“It’s definitely an addiction,” Charles says authoritatively. “And the day I finally admitted I was powerless over it was the happiest day of my life. Suddenly I was no longer responsible. If I saw a beautiful woman on the street and was attracted, I knew it wasn’t my fault. I just looked away and said, ‘This is a disease and I’m powerless over it.’”

At a table near the caffeine-free-coffee maker, I spot a fashionably dressed

brunette with a red tag. She's the first female sex addict I've seen. So of course I sit next to her. She's tall and graceful, like a Siamese cat but with a forehead as big and shiny as a car mirror. Her name, according to her tag, is Naomi.

She's sitting next to a heavyset woman with short black hair, a lumpy sweatsuit, and several chins and growths on her face. Charles refuses to sit with us.

"We signed a contract," Charles admonishes me.

"We're not hitting on them. We're just eating with them."

"We're not supposed to talk to female patients."

"Says who? It's not even in the contract."

"You're threatening my sobriety," he warns.

Naomi laughs as Charles walks off, indignant. It's the first music I've heard since checking in. The laughter of a woman is a high unto itself.

As we eat, I ask Naomi about her story. She says she cheated on her husband seventeen times. "I remember the first time I slept with someone else. I got my first client on my own at work and my boss took me out to congratulate me. We started drinking, and he leaned over and made out with me. That acceptance was like a high for me. My head was just spinning. I've cheated since then looking for that high again, and it's always the same situation: wanting acceptance from powerful men."

As she speaks, I think about how easy it would be to fuck her. She's got a nice body, and she seems to have a wild side.

Shit, now I definitely broke the contract. Maybe Charles was right. A shiver of remorse runs through me: Why am I trying to patch things up with Ingrid when I'm still clearly not capable of the commitment she expects? But I suppose that's why I'm here: to become capable.

Check-in: shame.

Guilt is about breaking the rules. Shame is about being broken.

"My therapist gave me a really big insight today," the person I just accidentally fantasized about is saying. "I always put a lot of thought and care into the clothes I wear. But she told me that dressing to get attention is a form of acting out and part of my disease."

These therapists must be stopped. If they succeed in bullying women out of dressing beautifully, we might as well all move to Iran.

"She explained that sex addiction is different for women," Naomi continues. "Female sex addiction is usually about seeking love."

She tells me that roughly 90 percent of sex addicts entering treatment are men because guys tend to act out, while roughly 90 percent of people with eating disorders are women because they tend to act in.

The woman next to her, Liz, has a purple tag, which she says is for post-traumatic stress disorder. Because Naomi is the only female sex addict here, they're in the same group. "They diagnosed me as a sexual anorexic," Liz says.

I've never heard the term before, so Liz explains that it means she avoids sex. She tells us she was raised in a cult and repeatedly gang-raped. Eventually she ran away. And since then, she's compulsively eaten a lot, neglected to care for herself, and dressed sloppily to keep men away. All those chins may look soft on the outside, but in actuality they serve as a strong shield, keeping her body safe.

After lunch, as I walk along the path to the dorms, the sex-addicted sex addiction therapist from Joan's group spots me and motions me over with his finger.

"Your last name is Strauss, right?" he asks when I join him on the lawn. His name tag reads TROY.

"Um, yes."

"I read your book."

"Do me a favor and don't tell anyone who I am," I plead. "It's too ironic."

"So why *are* you here, man? I thought you'd be out living the life."

"I was. I learned all that stuff and it was fun. But at some point I want to get married and have a family, so I have to shut it off if I want to do that."

"I'll tell you something," Troy whispers conspiratorially. "As a sex therapist, I've heard every story there is out there." He gestures away with his right arm. It doesn't matter which direction he's pointing: All roads lead out of here and to the real world. "And after fifteen years in this job, I don't know if I believe in monogamy."

I clap him on the back and breathe a sigh of relief. "Let's talk some more about that," I tell him.

I've found either an ally in truth here or a partner in crime.



I've been sitting in this room with Joan for three straight days now and I've barely spoken a word or learned a thing. Today, Calvin is in trouble again. In the meantime, a new patient has joined us: a gay crystal meth addict from Las Vegas named Paul. He sits in his chair, unshaven, scratching his short brown hair, probably wondering why he's here as Calvin tells Joan, "I was doing equine therapy and there was this girl"—Joan glares at him and he corrects himself—"I mean, woman, there. Carrie."

"Oh man, that's my arousal template right there," Troy mutters, patting his chest.

Joan's neck suddenly reddens. "Are you aware that undressing someone with your eyes is covert sexualized violence?" She doesn't yell—that would signify a loss of control. Her weapon is severity. She knows just how to reduce a man to a boy: become his mother on her worst day.

"Sorry, I am aware of that," Troy says obediently.

I, however, am not aware of that. I want to ask her: Since when did thinking become an act of violence? If you see a bank teller counting a huge stack of bills and imagine taking it when she's not looking, is that covert bank robbery? And what are the charges?

"Go ahead, Calvin," she says icily, "tell everyone how you pornified Carrie."

"I don't know. I just noticed that she had riding boots on and was talking about how she liked horses, and I do too. So I was fantasizing about riding away on a horse with her and getting married."

I always thought that sex addicts would be lecherous criminals, not overgrown boys who fantasize about getting married to women who share their interests. The first time I heard of sex addiction was when I saw a news exposé as a teenager. It followed a sex addict who drove around the city in a van with a mattress in back and somehow talked women into hooking up with him in there. He was very ordinary looking and plainly dressed, and I was envious that his sheer determination to have sex could actually produce results when my desire was getting me nowhere with the ladies.

I guess the moral is: Be careful what you wish for.

When I tune back into the room, Charles and Troy are bickering about pronouns. Joan asks them to sit in chairs opposite each other and talk

using what she calls the communication boundary. She holds up a poster board reading:

When I saw/heard \_\_\_\_\_.

The story I told myself about that was \_\_\_\_\_.

And I feel \_\_\_\_\_.

So I would like to request that \_\_\_\_\_.

Charles tries it: “When I heard you say that ‘we’re not monogamous by design,’ the story I told myself about that was that it’s not true for me. I’m here to get better. And I feel angry. So I would like to request that in the future, you use *I* to refer to yourself instead of *we*.”

“Well done,” Joan says. Then she turns to Troy, her voice saccharine sweet: “Now you need to respond using the communication boundary.”

I look around and see Calvin drifting off again, no doubt fantasizing about Carrie. I see Adam sitting next to him, probably wondering how to convince his wife he’s been cured. And I see Santa Claus retreating further into his mental hell, desperate for attention and advice. No one’s problems are being dealt with. They’re going to leave rehab the same as they walked in, just with more guilt and an awkward way of communicating. I can’t take it anymore.

My voice cracks as I open my mouth to speak for the first time, and the question spills out clumsily: “How is this helpful to us?”

“The way that we’re communicating in here is how people should be communicating with their spouses,” Joan responds coolly.

“And that’s going to stop them from sleeping with other women?”

It’s a serious question, but everyone laughs. Joan’s face trembles for a moment, as if nervous she’s about to lose control of the room. But then she regains her composure and answers, “You learn to love yourselves by learning to be relational with each other.” She emphasizes the word *relational* as if it’s a magical healing salve.

I don’t completely understand her answer, but it sounds like an important concept. “I’m not sure I understand what you mean by ‘relational.’”

“Being relational is being in the moment—in the here and now—with

someone else. Here's a tool you can use: Your mind can only do two things at once. So if you can sit and feel your breath go in and out as you listen to someone else, you are in the moment, in action. And when you're not in action, you're not relational: You're in reaction."

Finally, she appears to be teaching us something relevant. "So you're saying that if we're relational with people, then we won't want to cheat?"

She sizes me up for a second, trying to ascertain whether I'm a threat or not. It's the first time she's actually looked me in the eye. "What I'm saying is that if you have true intimacy with your partner, you won't need to seek sex outside the relationship."

She holds me in her gaze for a moment longer, then slowly scans the room. "This is the reason all of you ended up here. If you're addicted to sex, you're probably co-addicted to something else, like drugs or work or exercise, and this is because you're afraid of intimacy and you're afraid of your feelings."

I'm trying to get something out of this. I really am. But the accusations and diagnoses fly around so quickly that it's hard to accept them just on faith. You come in as an alcoholic or a sex addict, and you leave as an alcoholic codependent sex addict love avoidant with PTSD, OCD, and ADD. We're all suffering from low self-esteem, so I don't see how making us into walking DSMs helps.

Joan writes the words S.A.F.E. SEX on the blackboard. The acronym was devised by Patrick Carnes, she explains, and it means that sex must never be "*secretive, abusive, a way to alter feelings, or empty* of a committed intimate relationship."

Before I can ask what's wrong with casual, consensual sex, Joan announces that a counselor named Lorraine is going to speak to us after lunch about something called *eroticized rage*. Then she curtly dismisses us to eat.

"I kept this to myself, but there was more to my fantasy," Calvin whispers as we rise to leave.

"What's that?" I ask.

"I'm glad I didn't tell her about the picnic."

In the hallway, Adam and Troy are waiting for me. "Hey, man, I like the way you stood up to Joan," Troy says under his breath. "We all have those questions, and it's cool that you're asking them."

"Thanks." From the corner of my eye, I notice Charles speaking with



Joan in the therapy room. I'm pretty sure he's telling on me. Some folks live to say, "I told you so."

"Don't give in to her," Troy encourages me as we head to the cafeteria. "She's going to try to break you so you can be like Charles. But you have to stand up for us."

"Why don't you guys just speak up for yourselves?"

"You know, we just want to make it through to the end of the program." He and Adam exchange glances. Troy is here because his wife caught him having an affair with an import model he met on a website for women seeking sugar daddies. "Joan, she doesn't forget. And when our wives come for family week, we don't need her making things any more difficult for us, if you know what I mean."

I've heard other guys here mention family week like it's the equivalent of an IRS audit, so I ask them about it. They explain that the program is divided by weeks here. In week one, you do your timeline; in week two, you go through a psychological head trip known as chair work; in week three, parents and wives visit so your therapist can help heal your family system; and in the final week, you design a recovery plan for when you leave.

For sex addicts, the family-week process includes something called *disclosure*, which requires coming clean with a partner about past affairs and transgressions. Ideally, once these final wounds heal, the couple can build a new relationship from a place of truth and intimacy. With a therapist who's not tactful, though, or one who has a hidden agenda, disclosure can quickly turn into disaster—and the next time the addict sees his wife will be in court.



## Los Angeles, Two Weeks Earlier

I haven't been able to cry since this happened. I keep trying. My friends have cried for me, but I can't. I gave him my heart and my soul and . . . everything.

*This is the first time I've seen Ingrid since she said she never wanted to see me again. It took countless emails, flowers, and coaxing from mutual friends to bring her to couples therapy. And now that she's here, I can see what I've done. She's pale*

*and emaciated. Her eyes stare ahead vacantly and her skin seems devoid of nerve endings, like a combat veteran with post-traumatic stress disorder.*

Do you think you can trust him again?

I don't trust him. I just don't. I feel hopeless.

*And it rips me apart to know that I was the traumatic stress.*

Did you trust him before all this happened?

Yes, of course. I had 150 percent trust in him before. I thought our relationship was the best thing that ever happened to me. It was like I was on ecstasy every day. I was walking on a cloud.

And how did you feel, Neil?

I felt the same way.

*Ingrid shakes her head slowly and a distant voice inside her replies.*

That's not possible. There must have been something wrong for you to do that.

There wasn't, I swear. It had nothing to do with you. I just got . . . weak.

Ingrid, what would you need to even consider being in this relationship again?

I just need three things.

What are those?

Honesty, trust, and loyalty.

*The therapist turns to me. I know what she's going to ask. The only question I don't want to answer.*

Do you think you're able to give her those things?

*This is it: I must make a choice. The truth or the lie. Just one word either way. If I choose the truth, I risk losing her forever. If I choose the lie, I get to stay with her, but I continue living in deceit and risk hurting her again.*

*I start to speak. It's hard to get the words out. It's hard because I've opted for the truth.*

I can't say for sure that I'm strong enough yet to resist every temptation out there. This is why I'm going to rehab. So I can work on myself and make sure this never happens again. I need to understand how I could have done this to someone I love so much.

*Suddenly, Ingrid throws her arms around me and we embrace tightly, with as much pain as passion. Tears spring from both our eyes and make trails on the other's cheeks.*

*The first tears are sadness. The second are relief. And the third are the most dangerous of all: They are hope.*



Lorraine is a bird-like woman in her fifties with long shaggy gray hair, taut lips, a big beak, and incongruous thigh-high black boots. The wounds of whatever struggle she went through still show in the lines on her face.

“I’m here to tell you that sex addiction goes away,” she announces to us. “The compulsion stops. It’s not like alcohol. You can get past this. Recovery, if you work at it, will take you three to five years.”

At first, the words sound reassuring. But then I realize that if you work hard enough on almost any behavior, it can be changed in three to five years. I suppose another term for recovery is just behavior modification. There could be twelve-step programs for biting your nails, picking your nose, saying “I’m sorry” when you’re not really sorry, and, perhaps more dangerous than cheating on a spouse, texting while driving.

Lorraine tells us, as she’s probably told every addict who’s passed through here for the last decade, that her alcoholic father would lock her in a closet for hours at a time when she was three; that she was molested by a priest at age twelve; and that she spent most of her adult life as a codependent, stuck in a marriage to an abusive, alcoholic husband. She was one of those women who couldn’t leave the man who beat her—until he drank himself to death.

When Lorraine was here twenty years ago, her tag was blue.

“What I just presented to you was my timeline,” she explains. “And all of you are going to do your own timelines this week. Who here has childhood trauma?”

Everyone raises his hand except for me, Adam, and Santa Claus, who probably didn’t hear the question.

Lorraine stares at us incredulously. “Trauma comes from *any* abuse, neglect, or abandonment. Think of it this way: Every time a child has a need and it’s not adequately met, that causes what we define as trauma.”

“But by that definition, is there anyone in the world who doesn’t have trauma?” I ask her.

“Probably not,” she replies quickly. “We link and store any experience that brings us fear or pain because we need to retain that information to survive. All you have to do is touch a hot stove once and your behavior around hot stoves changes for the rest of your life—whether you remember getting

burned or not. So think of anything in your childhood that was less than nurturing as a hot stove, and when you encounter something similar as an adult, it can trigger your learned survival response. We have a saying here: *If it's hysterical, it's historical.*"

I look around the room. Everyone seems to be drinking this in. I suppose we're all broken in some way, whether or not we choose to admit it to others—or to ourselves.

"Most people think of trauma as the result of a serious assault, disaster, or tragedy," Lorraine continues. "But a small trauma, like a parent criticizing you day in and day out, can be just as damaging because it's happening on a regular basis. Think of it this way: If one big-T Trauma is a ten on the scale and a little-t trauma is a one, then ten little traumas can be just as powerful as one big Trauma."

Lorraine is blunt and severe, perhaps even more so than Joan, but there's something about the way she speaks that I trust. She doesn't seem to have a chip on her shoulder, nor does she sound like a member of the Moral Majority. And at least I'm finally learning something, though I'm not yet sure how it will help me be faithful to Ingrid.

"When children experience trauma, they tend to absorb the feelings of their abusers and store them in a compartment in their psyche that we call the shame core. It contains the beliefs *I am worthless, I am unlovable, I don't deserve*. Any time you feel *one down*—or inferior—to someone or you feel *one up*—or superior—those are false beliefs generated by your shame core. Because, in reality, every person in the world has equal worth and value."

Charles interrupts, "But I'm thinking of you as better than me because you're an expert on this topic and you know so much more than me. So what should I do?"

"And how do you feel about that?" Lorraine asks. "I'm standing here, a middle-aged widow, telling you how to live your life. I'm telling you I know more than you do and I'm one up to you."

"I feel anger," Charles says.

"Exactly. To survive painful beliefs and feelings, we often mask them with anger. That way, we don't have to feel the shame behind it."

I look at Joan. She's watching Lorraine with a frown, rapping her pencil against her knuckles. "The payoff of anger is mastery, control, or power," Lorraine continues. "So the anger makes you feel better and one up. And

when you use sex to restore power or feel better about yourself in a similar way, this is what's known as eroticized rage."

Eighty-eight percent of sex addicts, she tells us, came from emotionally disengaged families. Seventy-seven percent came from rigid or strict families. And sixty-eight percent say their families were both distant and strict.

"Being overcontrolled as a child sets you up to lie as an adult," she concludes. "So the theory of sex addiction is that when you feel out of control or disempowered, you sneak around and act out sexually to reestablish control and regain your sense of self."

This is where she loses me. "Can you give a specific example?" I ask.

"Well," she replies with what appears to be a touch of condescension, "what's your story?" Or perhaps it's not condescension, it's caring, and my shame core is just flaring up.

"I cheated on my girlfriend."

"Strict mother?"

"Yes."

"Mom wasn't emotionally available, so you're taking out your dick and using it to look for love. And sex is healing the anger at Mom for not being available." She speaks quickly and confidently, as if my story is exactly what she knew it would be.

"So I fuck other women to get back at my mom?"

"And to have an emotionally safe way of getting the affection, acceptance, and comfort you never got from Mom."

"I don't know. It felt like my mom was always there for me."

She strokes her hair, which is as prodigious and thick as Rick Rubin's beard, and asks a question that will alter my entire understanding of my childhood: "Was she there for you . . . or were you there for her?"