



Prologue



I am a single 40-something-year-old woman. I have a 12-year-old daughter and an incurable sexually transmitted virus. I used to have a seemingly insatiable and sometimes unhealthy sexual appetite. This was once my identity.

Ten years ago, I made what I felt was a uniting and unselfish decision to expose myself to herpes and accept my then-fiancé fully and totally. When I contracted it, despite the year of symptomatic pain, I didn't hold a grudge. This was true for many years.

At the time, I was grateful that I could have unprotected and free sexual encounters with my husband. We shared the same thing. We shared everything.

This is my story of recovery after the marriage ended. It's an unashamed exploratory memoir of a person who moved from a lingering self-loathing to complete sexual liberation and contentment, growth beyond what I thought was possible, and full, unbridled self-acceptance.

The purpose of this book is to allow you to live in harmony, or perhaps even in appreciation, of herpes and to enable the virus to be nothing more than an occasional minor physical irritation that your mind doesn't dwell on. You just notice it, apply a bit of cream, take a pill if you need to, and then your mind moves on to life's more important matters.

I hope this true story can bring you the hope you need and a renewed sexual thirst.

Lara



Changed



Sometimes I feel like a predator with a conscience. I crave intercourse like a vampire craves her next rich liquid meal. It would be so much easier to be a creature of the night if I didn't have the scruples, however. Sadly, I was only half-changed. Sometimes I feel so ravenous that I watch handsome strangers, sometimes even ordinary or unattractive strangers, with an unhealthy pining. It's a deep hunger that I have never experienced before, this desire to be filled up by a man. I look them up and down, undressing them in my deprived mind. Meanwhile, the subject is ignorant to the risk dwelling so close. I look innocent, perhaps even attractive to them. I know I can lure them in with a well-developed female appeal. Any of them, actually. The chase has never been an endurance event for me. I could always lasso myself a fine gentleman of any description should I feel so inclined. But never before have I had such a powerful longing to do so.

I'm pretty sure I'm a good-looking woman. I can tell you that here, but of course, I wouldn't admit it if I didn't have a pen name. The pseudonym enables me to be completely open and keep my family safe. Please know that everything in this book is real; that is, except the name on the cover. I have not invented, exaggerated, or embellished my story. I've written it intentionally to give hope to those who also have herpes. Also, to bring a little spark, a new perspective, and a light sexiness to a subject that might otherwise just trigger pangs of lifelong regret. I now embrace and live alongside my herpes most days. Most days, it doesn't register a thought. It has kept me safe and focused. It has pushed me beyond my comfort zone and insisted I think differently. Herpes has empowered me

to grow into a stronger, more capable, and confident woman than I ever could have been without it.

I am 44 years old, 1.70 meters in height, and I fluctuate between 65 and 74kg. The 9kg in question resides, usually in winter, on my hips, thighs, and ass. I used to hate that, but now I work it. I have a 12-year-old daughter whom I share with her father in a 50/50 kind of arrangement. She's my number one and my everything. I am confident, loving, and effervescent with all people I come across. I give myself to people – attention, presence, interest, and genuine empathy. I know people can feel that when I spend time with them. I'm also a bit of an over-achiever and a perfectionist. I was that good girl at school, the straight-A student at college, and always the one who took the minutes in team meetings at work. I was *that* girl.

All that said, I have immeasurable less-than-lovely qualities too. I am prone to anxiety, largely on account of my desperate quest to embody all those aforementioned traits at all times. It's a lot of pressure trying to be fucking excellent at fucking everything all the fucking time. And when I screw something up, maybe by over-parenting, or overdoing the goal-setting, or just trying too damn hard, then I go down hard. I'm a high-highs and dramatic-lows kind of person. Yet as I get older and wiser, I'd like to think I experience emotions with more temperance. Well, that's the plan, anyway. I'm also a bit of an over-sharer. I guess it's the unfortunate side effect of an energetic and talkative nature and a symptom of one being generous with oneself.

Some other imperfections: I have to pluck my chin almost daily (and I truly dread the day I lose the fine motor skills of my right hand). I fill my fridge with vegetables and then buy the healthiest takeout I can find almost every day, leaving the veggies to rot in the chiller bin. I get impatient when people take their time to make a decision or talk too slowly. My second and third toes on both my feet are webbed to the joint. Most people think it looks really weird, but I'm used to it and think 'finger toes' looks weirder. And now that I'm on the darker side of 40, it appears

my body has decided to stop tolerating both dairy, gluten, and sulfites. No dairy, no gluten, no wine, and no sex. Just fucking fabulous. Right, that's probably enough identifying information.

Oh, actually, one more thing that would be helpful to know about your author and guide at this stage. I have a high-profile day job. I'm in politics, and many in my community know me. Well, they think they know me. I absolutely love what I do, and I'm committed to my role for the next few decades. What my community doesn't know is that I'm a press secretary by day and a vampire by night.

Getting back to discussing the hairier sex, in the past, I could have taken or left men. Now, though, I want what only a man can provide so very much. Likely because I have a shoulder-dwelling winged whisperer, constantly in my ear, reminding me that if I were to indeed put on my best temptress and bite any of these men, they'd be changed forever. Damn that Fairy of Morality. So, I can't have them. I wouldn't do it to them. If I slept with someone, I'd risk changing them into what I am, a herpes carrier, and then they'd have the same cravings that cannot be satisfied. The frustration that accompanies this morality is what I imagine a chocolate-lover would feel like when she's informed one day that she's anaphylactically allergic to dairy, only I do think sex is a fundamental human need, and chocolate might not be.

Anyway, this new temptress alter ego was created in my head when my herpes virus, which I had become accustomed to during my comfortable marriage with my husband, who was also infected, met the newness of singledom shortly after we separated for good. When I got the virus from my fiancé, overlooking the first god-awful year of pain, itch, and silent suffering, of course, I really did learn to accept it. It brought us closer because now we shared something so private that others couldn't know and wouldn't understand. I felt sincerely happy to have what he had because now he didn't have to be alone. And let's be frank, it helped that we could have incredible sex without protection or inhibitions. I helped him to move through the guilt he suffered when we discovered I had con-

tracted it by telling him I felt our relationship was about sharing and being 'one.' Sounds really corny, but I meant it. And while he's a total dick-head in one hundred other ways, it's not because he gave me herpes.



Anger



When your ship is sinking, you can either go down with it or fight against the downward current of the plummeting vessel that threatens to take your life. The choices that lie before me now, after separating from my husband, feel very much like that. In my eyes, Kyle, my husband, was sexy, funny, and loving in some moments. Yet in other moments, actually the ‘clincher’ moments, the ones that should have mattered, he would stand firmly in Camp Kyle. Our hearts met in the moments where we shared a deep conviction for personal development, watching the same TED talks followed by long nights discussing the complexities of human behavior and psychology, planning together our trip to Tony Robbins courses and our future. When things didn’t evenuate quite like the whimsical plan, Kyle was incapable of accepting it. He had a conflict of character, dual personalities, you might say, and undiagnosed ADHD; I was sure of it (although he was defiantly resistant to getting help in fear of a possible self-limiting diagnosis. Tenderness between the sheets never translated into a tender touch in the world outside of the bedroom with Kyle. Love and adoration one minute paired with beautiful long and completely free love-making unfolded quickly into an unyielding dedication to wild and fanciful goal-oriented tasks once orgasm was achieved and clothes were reapplied.

Kyle told me a heart-wrenching story from his childhood that he was made to feel like he was an inconvenience to his parents. He was the unplanned and final child of seven, one of whom, a little girl, had tragically passed away at just a few weeks old. Kyle’s mother, never having grieved properly and being unsupported by her old-school, work-oriented hus-

band, was emotionally unavailable to Kyle. He used to describe her as being good of heart but incapable of providing him the attachment he craved as a young boy. He also talked often of the negative expectations she held for him, describing that he would amount to nothing or end up in crime. According to Kyle, his parents never had the money nor inclination to give him presents or holidays, although the children who came before him – his parents' first family before the tragedy as Kyle imagined it – shared wonderful family memories together.

Given this childhood neglect, his behavioral issues began young. A black-and-white thinker and not one to take advice, he was selling drugs by his mid-teens. This wouldn't have been the first sign of his fierce rebellion. He ran away with a packed suitcase at the age of seven, returning late that night when a neighbor picked him up off the street and brought him home. When I met him, Kyle had worked through much of his belligerence and had transformed his desire to make waves into a desire to make money. He had learned how to channel that energy and desperate, unfulfilled need for personal power. He was no longer raging against the machine, but instead working the system to create wealth and prosperity. What he hadn't quite worked out yet was how addicted he had become to the attainment of success. He knew there were underlying forces that drove him, but instead of trying to work through the past hurt, he was still trying to make up for his pain by creating wealth. Kyle threw himself into business after business, but his aptitude for sales was forced, almost unnatural, and his breath, I'm quite sure, smelt like commission.

Meeting on an online dating site in the early 2010s, when sparks didn't fly for me initially, he became my friend. Eventually, my best friend. It took 12 months from that first date for me to fall in love with him and consider taking our relationship to anything physical. He didn't tell me he had herpes until we were lying in bed together for the first time, and he was generous enough to make sure I researched it before intercourse. But I was already in love. My decision took a week. Four weeks

later, we became engaged to be married, and I had my first herpes symptoms. That was a big month.

Kyle was a real decision-maker, and I needed that in my life at the time. I felt it was right. He was so charming, and I was besotted. Once we had married, it took Kyle a year to talk me into being his assistant, and it was all downhill after that. There were early red flags I chose not to see. In my heart, I knew the decision was fraught with risk, but from Kyle's perspective, I was capable and the closest person to him. In his mind, it made sense, but it all went south over the next year when all the ideas I brought to him fell on deaf ears, and chaos reigned supreme while we both ran in circles trying to prop up Kyle's self-esteem with a rolling flow of cash. I told myself I needed to trust him. I reminded myself that I loved him. He was my husband. And while I hadn't had his baby, I had his herpes. I was locked in and fully committed. At the best of times, I don't take instructions well. I'm creative and independent-minded. But when the instructions from Kyle were abrupt and sometimes just plain stupid, my own belligerence kicked in, and my marriage failed only two years after the wedding ceremony. I really do know how to fail fast.

The pain of my marriage breaking up was excruciating. Not just because I was so addicted to Kyle – he was exciting and powerful and funny, and I adored him – but also because, in my mind, he was the only person I would ever be able to sleep with now that I had herpes. I wallowed in quiet desperation for months, flip-flopping between a sad and deep knowing that the marriage was not meant to be and a desperate sense that he was my best option. On those days, I tried hopelessly to sew the marriage back together. One week Kyle would call to try to patch things up, and I would reassure him that we'd made the right choice; the next week, our roles would reverse. We'd have nights together and then go our separate ways when we couldn't agree on every other matter outside of the bedroom.

Addiction is not limited to substances and sex. Our precariously balanced human souls can easily get addicted to anything that gives us a

serotonin hit, especially in a weak moment where we are seeking to self-medicate our problems. For this reason, I'm not a TV watcher, and I try to avoid the day-to-day social media highs that are easy to submit to when our posts get a few likes or shares. Social media could be my kryptonite, so I try to keep it at arm's length. One month, it's just a business tool. Next month, I'm quite sure it will cost me 100 hours. Such is the ebb and flow of life and addiction.

Social media is painful during break-ups. Being able to view your ex's profile, trawl through their feeds and the feeds of their friends and see when they have a new girlfriend only prolongs the time it takes to heal. In the end, Kyle found another woman and then blocked me across every social media platform possible. Shamefully, it was that way around. Retrospectively, it was one of the most helpful things he ever did.

Despite the anger, my healing began that day. I was angry with Kyle for giving up on us. I was incensed that he blamed me for our demise. I was wild that he couldn't even see his brazen disregard for my needs, the part he played. But I was most furious that he had given me herpes and then walked away so readily. However, I thrive when I internalize and commit to a challenge, and I allowed myself to indulge in my other addictive behavior of goal-setting. I crave the chemical high that rewards my synapses when I can ceremoniously tick off my monthly goals written up on the whiteboard screwed to my bedroom wall.

So, what is at the top of my goal list now? Fighting for my upward journey against the dragging current of the chemical romance that is now sinking. *I'm getting to the fucking top to feel the sun on my face and to once again fill my lungs with air.*

For the year ahead, I decide that I have no choice but to lead a life without sex. I reclaim my virginity, adopt celibacy, and set my sights on bigger things. I am grateful that I am smart enough to create an interesting life without a man. It sounds like a challenge, but it will just need a mindset shift. I've done that before. Nothing that daily visualizations and affirmations can't embed.

I'm grateful that achievement turns me on.
Because now it's just me and my success.
And masturbation.
Forever.