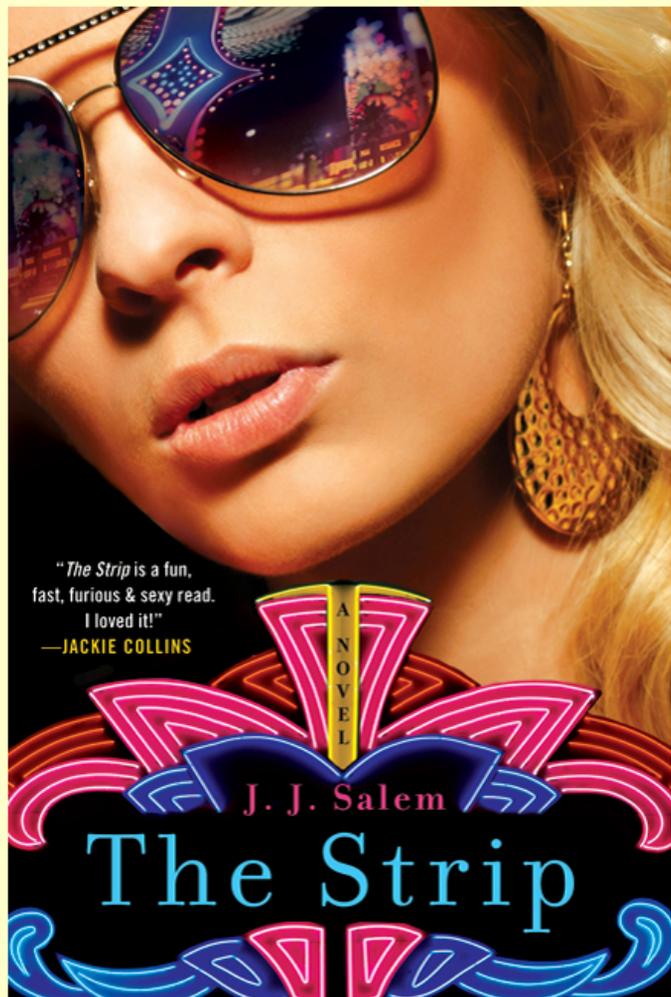


READ IT FIRST



This is a work of fiction. All of the characters, organizations, and events portrayed in this novel are either products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously.

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One —

Even Cam Lawford's nipples were exquisite. This was the first thought that came to Kristin Fox when her eyes fluttered open. She let out a soft, satisfied moan. "How long have I been asleep?"

"About twenty minutes," he whispered. "But you earned it. That was quite a workout." His fingertips skated down her naked torso.

Kristin stretched languidly, feeling a delicious soreness that would linger for days. It was still amazing that her tiny body could accommodate him. She was only four-foot-eleven. She weighed ninety-eight pounds. And Cam was the most well-endowed man she had ever been with. To say his prized asset was practically the size of a wine bottle would only be a mild exaggeration.

"Our time's up." Gently, he extricated himself from her embrace and swung around, planting both feet on the floor. The man was a stickler for keeping a schedule. Two hours was two hours. Not a minute more, not a minute less.

She watched him dress back into the cop uniform, complete with handcuffs, Taser X3, and fake badge. His body was a marvel—the perfect V shape, the sculpted muscles, the taut, tanned, naturally smooth skin. If there was a single physical flaw, Kristin could not find it.

Cam discreetly pocketed the red envelope on the desk. "As always, it was a pleasure, Mrs. Fox." He started for the door. "Think about a new scenario for next time. I could get my hands on a soldier's uniform or a firefighter's suit."

She stared after him, half shocked, half appalled, all the way titillated.

Cam gave her a hot and final look. “Call me.” And then he walked out.

In the silence that followed, the thousand dollars it had just cost her to feel this good seemed like a bargain. She was positively glowing—inside and out. That she was paying for the pleasure did not make her feel the slightest bit desperate. With her highly toned petite frame, long blond hair, and delicate features, many remarked that she resembled pop songstress Kylie Minogue. Finding a man who would sleep with her for free was not her problem. But like everything else, you get what you pay for.

Suddenly, she was struck by a sharp pang of loneliness, private shame, and a wave of guilt. And once again Kristin wondered, *What in God’s name am I doing?*

She was slumming at the Flamingo, one of the oldest hotels on the Strip. The rooms were inexpensive. Ugly tourists lined up elbow-to-elbow at the casino’s slot machines. Hookers staked out the elevators. Even the property’s newly remodeled Go suites were quintessential Vegas tacky. The white vinyl upholstered ceiling-high headboards, posh carpeting, and sleekly modern décor touches gave off sci-fi vibrations in the vein of the Jane Fonda camp classic *Barbarella*.

Still, the paradox gave Kristin a frisson of smug satisfaction. Her husband, Hart Fox, was a top executive at the London Hotel, the Strip’s sprawling new mega-property competing for a share of a tightening hotel, gambling, and entertainment market.

And here she was at the Flamingo, dropping cash for a room booked under her maiden name, making time with a stud-for-hire. It was the kind of tacky, scandalous, and selfish behavior that powerful, accomplished, and high-profile men typically indulged in. She allowed herself a moment of secret celebration. This one was for the fed-up wives of America.

Every husband had secrets. Every wife had them, too. In fact, writing about such matters had made Kristin rich and almost famous. Like

a character from one of her popular novels, Hart believed that her appointment for private Pilates instruction was actually private Pilates instruction. The subterfuge always provided a quiet, if temporary, thrill, especially in light of the fact that her husband could be such a mean son of a bitch.

This is purple prose romance crap for sexually frustrated housewives.

Years later, she could still hear Hart's dismissive voice inside her head. He had never supported her writing ambitions. His complaint was that she wasted valuable hours that could be better spent on their two children and other household concerns.

But Kristin had refused to give up. She began to work surreptitiously, stealing fragments of time during Lily's gymnastics classes or Ollie's soccer games, slipping out to early-morning yoga classes that were a front for sixty-minute writing and coffee binges at Starbucks. And she took advantage of every possible moment in between.

On some level, Hart's lack of support was an important factor in her success. The combination of resentment and determination to prove him wrong became unstoppable fuel. It changed her writing dramatically. Kristin stopped echoing the styles of other authors and found her own unique voice. She crafted wicked observational tales about what she saw around her—asshole husbands, unfulfilled wives, slutty neighbors, incompetent parents, and messed-up children.

The result was *Come to Bed*, a raunchy exposé on the rise in spouse swapping among upscale suburban dwellers. After years of self-doubts, unpublishable drafts, and industry rejections, everything happened at a dizzying pace.

The first agent she queried signed her immediately. Within days, the novel garnered such intense interest that it went to auction and sold for \$500,000. HBO snapped up television rights and put the project on a fast-track development schedule. Just months after the hardcover edition reached the upper echelon of every bestseller list, the premium pay cable channel was airing a series based on her novel. Critics dismissed it as "Sex in the Suburbs." But the ratings were huge.

Kristin Fox had officially become a minor cultural phenomenon.

Just like Jackie Collins once blew the lid off Hollywood social mores for a voyeuristic public, Kristin did very much the same, only her excavation was the moral rot that existed inside well-heeled suburbia.

But the controversy surrounding *Come to Bed* was mild compared to the incendiary reaction that greeted her second novel, *The Guy Next Door*, which chronicled the secret gay society of conservative Southern married men attending a megachurch called Pine River. Though right-wing crusaders attacked her with a vengeance, the outrage only spurred sales and attracted more readers.

No matter her success, Hart still dismissed Kristin's career as an indulgent hobby. He only saw the way that it stood in the path of her responsibilities to him, their children, and home.

Leave the selfish bastard.

This was a thought that rolled around in Kristin's mind almost every day. She had the reasons to say good-bye. She had the money to finance her exit. But she just could not bring herself to put a plan into motion.

More than anything, it was Ollie and Lily that gave her pause. The children adored their father. And while failing her in so many ways, Hart had been reasonably good to them. Plus, a gut thing told her that Ollie would insist upon living with Hart in the event of a divorce, a move that she felt sure would risk derailing her already struggling twelve-year-old son.

Beyond her concern for the children, though, Kristin had to admit that the idea of starting over alone was paralyzing. So much of her life had been spent loving Hart, then enduring him, ultimately resenting him. But was this destined to be the rest of her life, too? If Hart knew how she had spent her morning, the things she had done to Cam Lawford, the things she had begged him to do to her . . .

Her BlackBerry chimed with a text alert.

OLLIE FOX

Bring me some lunch. Subway sounds good.

She stared at the message. Ollie was growing up to issue rude demands just like his father.

KRISTIN FOX

Sorry, have an appt. Eat at school.

OLLIE FOX

This sucks!

KRISTIN FOX

Children have survived worse.

The communication halted. Ollie would probably sulk over her refusal to cater to this instant whim. And he would likely complain to Hart, who in turn would attack Kristin with something like, “The boy has to eat. What were you doing that was more important?”

She would be so tempted to answer, “I had just finished fucking a twenty-four-year-old. It was an inconvenient time.”

Kristin dressed quickly, covered her long blond hair with a Pucci scarf, donned face-swallowing Oliver Peoples sunglasses, and slipped out of the Flamingo, into the parking garage, and away from the Strip.

Traffic crawled along Las Vegas Boulevard. She suffered through it, alternately touching up her lipstick and checking e-mails as Kings of Leon’s “Sex on Fire” blared at deafening volume in her moonbeam-colored Bentley Continental GT.

Kristin had chosen this particular make and model because she had announced to Hart that she was buying a car and paying cash for it with her first royalty earnings for *Come to Bed*. When she drove the vehicle home, the look on his face—total shock mixed with constipation—had been worth the outrageous sticker price.

Finally, the gridlock gave way. Kristin reached Nevada 589 and picked up speed. Ten minutes later, she was pulling into a Pueblo Revival-styled office court and rushing inside a second-floor suite.

A bell on the door announced her arrival into an unstaffed waiting

room. She sat down long enough to anxiously thumb through several pages of *Architectural Digest* before Jennifer Payne opened an adjoining office door and invited her inside with a warm smile.

Nancy—a fluffy, Alpine white, immaculately groomed bichon frise—greeted her affectionately.

Kristin assumed her place on the chocolate brown leather sofa. The initial moments of every therapy session were always fraught with awkwardness. Out of sheer politeness, she sometimes felt compelled to engage in banal small talk, even though her preference was to get right down to it. Fifty minutes could go by in a flash.

“How are you?” Jennifer said, and unlike most people who asked the question, she really wanted to know.

And that’s when Kristin started to cry.

Two —

The irony never escaped Jennifer Payne. At thirty-five, she was a marriage and family therapist who specialized in relationship issues. Clients—most of them women—came to her seeking coping tools for emotional rescue. And yet her own union—going seven years weak to a man she could barely tolerate these days—was pushing her to the brink of frustration.

But like failed novelists could teach novice writers and like unsuccessful thespians could mentor student actors, Jennifer knew that she still had something worthwhile to offer her clients.

Kristin Fox fascinated her. The woman was an ever-changing kaleidoscope of love and hate, liberation and imprisonment, confidence and insecurity.

“Over the years, I’ve seen a number of clients in conventional marriages who seek out affairs,” Jennifer said quietly. “One of the similarities is that they more often than not choose men who are not good lovers. At least not better than their husbands. They sacrifice sexual satisfaction to be appreciated again, to not be taken for granted. I’m curious. How does Cam make you feel?”

Kristin reflected for a moment. “He makes me feel entitled . . . monstrously entitled.”

Jennifer was intrigued. “Go on.”

“I get to the hotel first and wait. The anticipation of hearing that knock on the door is so exciting. And I love it when he takes his money.

I feel like I'm in control." She opened her mouth to say more, then seemed to think better of it.

Jennifer always allowed for silence. Therapy was not talk radio. Filling every second with sound did not necessarily move a session forward.

"He's in awe of the fact that I'm a bestselling author. He doesn't want me to be some bored little housewife. I read to him, mostly new pages that I've written. It's the most intimate I've ever been with a man . . . it's more intimate than the sex."

"Explain to me the sense of entitlement," Jennifer said.

"For those two hours, he's mine. I own him. He works hard to please me. He feeds my feminine ego, my writer's ego, too. And he's this young, hot, hard-bodied . . . *toy*." Kristin gestured for Nancy to join her on the couch.

Jennifer watched as Kristin indulged the dog with gentle caresses. Nancy was a partner of sorts in the private practice. Her presence comforted clients and seemed to encourage them to share more of themselves.

"Why should men like Tiger Woods have all the fun? I think more married women should cheat. I believe we should act on our horniness just like men do. Does that make me a terrible person?"

"Of course not. It's . . . complex," Jennifer said, employing one of her favorite terms. The word was nonjudgmental, and it bought the necessary time and space to explore more deeply. "Perhaps this is an assertion of power. You have the economic independence to choose a man for precisely the purpose you desire. But this is also being driven by the lack of satisfaction in your marriage."

"It always comes back to him, doesn't it?"

"On a certain level, yes," Jennifer confirmed. "You're having an erotic adventure. All the rebellion, secrecy, and naughtiness make it fun. In a sense, you're getting everything that you want. You're using the money from the career that Hart has always disparaged to go out there and be unfaithful. You're making a fool of him. Meanwhile, Cam is a flesh-and-blood fantasy. He offers sexual pleasure. He appreciates

your talent and accomplishments. I understand how satisfying that must be. But it's not exactly real. How long can it last? And what will you do when it ends?"

Kristin just sat there for several extended, preoccupied seconds.

Jennifer noticed the time. She generally liked to conclude each session by reflecting on the work done, but sometimes the clock simply ran out. "We're going to have to stop here for today."

Six clients a day was Jennifer's limit. She preferred fewer than that, particularly when dealing with a DC—therapist vernacular for *difficult customer*.

There was one on her current caseload—Billie Shelton, the rock star turned tabloid tragedy turned Vegas act. One session could leave Jennifer spent and feeling useless. Her sense was that Billie was keeping secrets—perhaps dangerous secrets—and that made the process of emotional discovery almost impossible.

Thinking about Billie's case, Jennifer noticed an envelope between the sofa cushions. It belonged to Kristin. Jennifer typically requested that clients bring in photographs of the family members, lovers, and friends whom they discussed in therapy.

People were often different than the way Jennifer envisioned them or the way clients described them. She flicked through Kristin's snapshots. Hart Fox was sexier and more handsome than she imagined. In her mind, he was bald, stocky, and rigid with intensity, the kind of man whose emotional expressions were limited to anger and lust. The subject in the photo was far more captivating. His tall, athletic frame, dark hair, and brooding intensity brought to mind actor Jon Hamm's Don Draper persona from *Mad Men*.

Ollie had been painted as a mirror image of his father in look and attitude. There was a certain resemblance to Hart, but Jennifer saw a sullen, overweight boy struggling with a low self-concept. Only Lily, the nine-year-old, lived up to the sweet, angelic girl that Kristin promoted.

The next snapshot gripped her attention and raised her temperature.

There had been no exaggeration or off-base descriptors in Kristin's assessment of Cam Lawford. He was a gorgeous man with an underwear model's body and a brazenly sexy attitude. Kristin had captured an image of him in bed, with the top sheet barely up to his waist. The hooded look in his piercing blue eyes seemed to convey a carnal campaign promise: *I'm the best time you will ever have in bed.*

Jennifer could not stop staring at the photograph. Generally, the sight of nude or semi-nude men did not turn her on. But something about Cam Lawford's pinup looks and guy's guy brawn had her body pinpricking with arousal.

Shamefully, she shoved the pictures back inside the envelope and sat down at the desk to establish her equilibrium, opening her MacBook Pro to scan e-mails and surf *The Daily Beast*. But she found herself Googling "Cam Lawford."

Dozens of hits materialized—sports items from his Penn State career, stories chronicling his brief appearance with the Miami Dolphins . . . and a single entry for his own Web address.

Jennifer's thumb hovered over the click-bar that would activate the link. Just as her finger made contact and brought the site onscreen, she experienced a stab of regret . . . yet she did not turn back.

It was basic. Some photographs, a list of services that included massage, fitness training, and personal entertainment, a contact number and e-mail address, and a very large, very bold **WOMEN ONLY** disclaimer.

She was astonished that her curiosity had allowed her to go this far. But Kristin had been so explicit about her encounters with Cam. She talked endlessly about his stamina, his vigorous way with intercourse, his insatiable passion, and his impressive endowment.

Jennifer closed her eyes. The months had stretched on to almost a year. That's how much time had passed since Patrick had made love to her. She craved the warmth of a man's touch. In fact, her body ached for it. But even acknowledging this natural desire brought on a crushing guilt as she considered her husband.



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