

A QUESTION OF BALANCE



A patient
who calmly claims
to be Satan
may hold the key
to a murder...
and to
Dr. Steven Gold.

a novel by

DAVID S. SHERMAN

**A thought-provoking murder mystery probing the uneasy space
where psychology, philosophy, and religion collide.**

Dr. Steven Gold has built his life on understanding—of his patients,
of the mind, of himself.

Until a new patient enters his office.

Samael Light is articulate, composed, and unnervingly perceptive. Then,
with quiet certainty, he makes an impossible claim: he is Satan.

What begins as an unusual case quickly becomes something disturbingly
personal.

As their sessions deepen, Light begins unearthing truths Gold has long buried—
blurring the boundary between patient and self.

When a respected rabbi is found murdered—his body staged in a crucifixion—
Gold is drawn into the investigation. His connection to the victim is unclear,
but deeply unsettling.

As the line between memory and reality begins to fracture, Gold finds himself
caught in a tightening web of guilt, belief, and suspicion.

**As the search for truth intensifies,
one question becomes unavoidable:**

What if understanding is not the same as knowing?

**With echoes of *The Secret History*
and *The Silent Patient*,
A Question of Balance explores
the fragile boundary between
analysis and obsession—
and how even a mind trained to heal
can lose sight of itself.**



A QUESTION OF BALANCE

a novel by
David S. Sherman

Literary Psychological Suspense

Approximately 95,000 words

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PROLOGUE

*Darkness does not always arrive suddenly.
Sometimes it gathers—quietly, patiently—
until you realize you can no longer see.*

CHAPTER ONE

Light Often Blinds

*The question is not whether God exists,
but whether His existence would excuse us.*

— Simone Weil, *Gravity and Grace*

“Fuck you!”

Steven Gold spun away, his voice breaking against the stone walls of the sanctuary. “Damn you... and your God. All the lives you’ve destroyed.”

A hand caught his arm.

He turned into it and pushed. Or thought he had.

“No, wait—oh!”

The rabbi was suddenly falling, though Gold couldn’t see where the fall began. Candlesticks toppled. The silver goblet struck the floor, and red wine spread across the gray carpet—too dark, too fast, more than a goblet could hold.

Then the body.

A heavy, final thud.

Then silence.

Not the reverent hush Gold knew so well, but something emptied of response—a silence that did not listen, did not forgive.

Behind silver-rimmed glasses, wide, unblinking eyes caught the glow of the *ner tamid*—the eternal flame above the ark. Its light wavered, casting a dull gold shimmer across the darkened sanctuary.

Flickers danced across the rabbi’s pupils, as if reflecting something no one else could see.

His lips parted, caught between thought and speech—holding back something he could not say. The familiar lines of his face, once lit with warmth and certainty, were unreadable now. No peace, no resistance—only surrender.

The silence stretched.

Whatever thoughts Rabbi Shapiro might have formed would remain unspoken. Whatever meanings he had gleaned from the sacred scrolls would not be unraveled again—at least not by him. Perhaps another would speak them soon, over fresh earth.

Gold looked down at his hands—faintly stained.

He had no memory of touching him.

No memory of not touching him.

Only that it was done—and that some hidden part of him had wanted it.

The first thing Steven Gold noticed was the time.

Wednesday. 4:17 a.m.

A voice—quiet, insistent.

What have you done?

He was awake again—heart racing, mouth dry—already rehearsing explanations for a day that had not yet begun. Nothing was wrong. Nothing had happened. And yet his body behaved as if it knew otherwise.

Rachel slept near the edge of the bed, one arm flung outward as if reaching for someone who had already slipped away. He watched the rise and fall of her back and felt the old tenderness come first, then the guilt, then the practiced helplessness that had learned to pass for marriage.

A tightness gathered beneath his sternum, familiar now, as if something inside him had been folded too many times and could no longer open.

He told himself what he always did: that anxiety was merely anticipation without an object. That fear, like belief, could be managed if properly named.

As he swung his legs onto the floor, a thought arrived uninvited—fully formed, immovable:

Whatever is coming, I'll be blamed for it.

He stood there longer than necessary, barefoot, listening to the house breathe. Somewhere in the distance a siren wailed—brief, inconclusive—then faded.

The dream was dissolving, too quickly for him to write it down. But even as it vanished, Gold felt the familiar urge take hold—the need to shape it, arrange it, make sense of it after the fact.

He had already begun constructing the story he would one day tell about how this all started.

He did not yet know which parts would be true.

CHAPTER TWO

Lust

*Unexpressed emotions will never die.
They are buried alive and will come forth later in uglier ways.*
— Sigmund Freud, paraphrased in Ernest Jones, *The Life and Work of Sigmund Freud*

Wednesday, 4:00 p.m.

Fuck. Just leave.

Steven Gold froze—like he'd looked straight into Medusa's eyes. Rigid, barely breathing, he feared even the faintest chair squeak might betray him. After two minutes of pounding the reception door and stabbing the Ring doorbell, Jane Sanders snapped. She screamed, pounding the door with both fists. At last she whirled, boot heel slamming the door—a furious concession of defeat. Her voice was low, husky, roughened by smoke. “This isn't over, you fucker! I know you're in there!” “You can't hide forever. You'll be sorry—I swear! I'll tell Rachel the truth!” She stomped toward the elevators. Even in grainy video, she still moved with runway grace. The AC's low hum filled the silence. Still motionless, he shifted only his eyes.

When she completely vanished into the elevator bay, he exhaled—long and shaky. *Fatal Attraction* flashed through his mind.

Thank God I don't have a pet rabbit.

She's right. I can't avoid her forever. And Rachel's already suspicious.

She keeps calling and hanging up. No voicemails. Enough.

She wore the look that had lodged in him: a sheer blouse he'd once admired too openly, low-rise jeans, chocolate Hermès boots that carried her like weapons.

Elegant. Dangerous. In control—and he hated the want it woke in him.

The runway never left her. She still owned it. Muscle memory dressed in leather and silk.

Her New York strut remained fierce—even in fury, captivating.

He devoured the footage—scrolling, zooming.

He froze her mid-glare. Zooming in, he remembered the silk of her hair, the faint ghost of *Joy* by Jean Patou.

Smoke, sweat, Joy. It always flips that switch.

He stared, mesmerized. Slowly, he zoomed out, savoring how her hair curved around her cheeks, slid down her shoulders, and brushed the blouse's collar.

She was no longer the coke-thin waif of her early days. Her once-pristine skin bore the imprint of life—sun, smoke, nights blurred by excess. Time had softened her, but her bone structure still commanded attention.

Each fist strike thundered like a techno beat on the catwalk revealing wrinkles and age spots on her long fingers—a grip that seemed to close around him.

Behind the locked door, those feral blue eyes, that wild silver hair—thrilled him.

He paused—capturing her face at a strange angle: one eye slightly higher, one lip subtly fuller. The asymmetry unsettled him—which only excited him more.

Not twenty-one anymore, but even at fifty-one she's still a perfect ten.

But crazy as hell. Lethal.

He panned once across the frozen image, caught by the sheer blouse and the ghosted outline beneath it. Rage, cold, movement—it didn't really matter. Arousal stirred, familiar and unwelcome. Jane would have known exactly where his eyes had gone.

She'd love this. Knowing I was still staring. Still caught—

Suddenly his phone vibrated—Rachel's face—a FaceTime call.

“Shit.” Quickly he slammed the iPad shut.

He tapped “Message” and sent his custom reply.

I'm sorry but I'm in session right now and will have to return your call later.

Rachel would be gutted if she saw me—perving like this. Like some creep.

And at Jane.

He opened the iPad again.

Rachel's gentleness had once steadied him; now it accused him. Her passion had not vanished so much as gone underground, buried behind canvas and clay. He told himself they were both complicit—she in her pain, he in his intellectualization—each allowing the other the mercy of not asking too much.

I'm such a moron—I never should've told Rachel I liked that blouse. She always suspected. After Thanksgiving, she'd said, “I see the way you two look at each other.”

Without thinking, he touched his wedding ring to his lips—an old gesture, reflexive, half-prayer, half-apology—and forced himself to breathe.

For one second he saw Rachel before the grief: barefoot in his old Harvard sweatshirt, laughing because she had spilled cobalt glaze across the kitchen tile and called it an accident too beautiful to clean. He had loved her then without needing to explain it. He loved her still, which made what he was doing worse.

Casting a final glance at the frozen frame of Jane's torso, he hovered over the trash icon, hesitated—then tapped: “DELETE VIDEO.”

Jane isn't more beautiful. She is desperate. Deliberate. Provocative in every gesture, and she knows exactly how to wield it.

This wasn't just lust anymore. It was evidence, and he knew it.

Delete it. Now.

A confirmation window appeared.

He exhaled—deep, controlled.

He reopened Spotify. Haydn's *Cello Concerto No. 1* resumed where it had left off.

Rachel loved Haydn's predictability—the order. It soothed her, let her light shine.

Gold needed that order now. Its serenity poured into the silence. Yo-Yo Ma's cello tinted thoughts he hadn't let touch himself in years.

He closed the iPad—slowly. A soft magnetic click sounded, like a locked door.

The thrill had already encoded itself: arousal tinged with guilt, like a scar that still flinched when touched.

He told himself it was gone.

Disaster avoided—for now.

Dangerous coincidence. Get a grip.

The faint smell of stale coffee clung to the office air.

He leaned back to his leather-bound *Cain: A Mystery*, still dog-eared from Jane's intrusion.

As he opened it, a folded sheet slipped from between the pages and fell to the floor.

Gold picked it up.

His handwriting. Undated.

THE STRUGGLE

He stared for a moment.

I remember.

He read the first line:

Nay, Prometheus—keep thy stolen flame...

Then he folded the sheet again and tucked it back inside *Cain*.

Not now.

He re-read Cain's soliloquy—

Act I, Scene I:

Cain. (solus.). And this is

Life!—Toil! and wherefore should I toil?—because

My father could not keep his place in Eden.

What had I done in this?—I was unborn,

I sought not to be born; nor love the state

To which that birth has brought me. Why did he

Yield to the Serpent and the woman? or,

Yielding, why suffer? What was there in this?

The tree planted, and why not for him?

If not, why place him near it, where it grew

The fairest in the centre? They have but

One answer to all questions, "t was his will,

And he is good."—How know I that? Because

He is all-powerful, must all-good, too, follow?

I judge but by the fruits—and they are bitter—

Which I must feed on for a fault not mine.

Whom have we here?—A shape like to the angels,

Yet of a sterner and a sadder aspect

Of spiritual essence: why do I quake?

His Apple Watch buzzed—splintering his deep concentration, yanking him from Byron back into the dull gravity of now.

His next patient would arrive in minutes.

Byron—what a waste. Dying so young. What insights did death steal?

Some are born into judgment. Others just wait for it.

CHAPTER THREE

Mauvaise Foi

Bad faith differs from lying in that it seeks to evade the truth of one's freedom and responsibility.
— Jean-Paul Sartre, *L'Être et le Néant*

Wednesday, late afternoon

His Apple Watch buzzed.

Gold pressed *Stop*, irritated by yet another intrusion. He'd been absorbed in Cain's injustice—the punishment for a sin that was never his to bear.

He sighed and set the book aside, his mind already drifting.

My shoes aren't as comfortable as they look.

He lifted his feet and rested his Santoni Uniqua loafers on the ebony desktop.

Shit—my freshman year at Harvard cost less than these loafers. And the dorm bed was more comfortable. Vestis virum facit, Erasmus wrote—clothes make the man. At \$300 an hour; the costume better fit. Rachel used to tease me—said I looked like I was auditioning for a part I didn't believe in. She was right... as usual.

He leaned back in his Eames chair; striped socks peeked from beneath tailored cuffs. Exhaling through pursed lips, he dog-eared the page, and reached for his iPad.

There it is again—the flicker; a blind spot blooming. Aura, not stroke. Moving.

He paused his Romantic literature reading playlist and queued up Pink Floyd. “Comfortably Numb” began, low and steady.

“Hello, hello, hello—is there anybody in there?”

He chuckled, recalling the moment at his office door not twenty minutes earlier.

Fitting, almost too fitting.

David Gilmour's solo floated through the room. Gold looked around—content, almost serene. He took pride in the office: how polished it looked, how perfectly it mirrored him. Tenth floor, Wilshire Corridor—quiet, efficient, everything in its place.

He especially liked the photo from last month's *The Atlantic* profile—“Psychotherapy in America: A Question of Balance.” Sitting behind his desk: the perfect shot. The famous Dr. Richard Carlyle's heir apparent—at least, that was how they'd framed it.

He tried not to think about the emails—angry, frightened, accusatory. A few were from people the police had actually questioned after his St. Augustine murderer profile. One voicemail message he still hadn't deleted.

The lights flickered.

Gold looked up.

For a second the room seemed to tilt, then settle. Everything remained exactly where he had placed it, yet the office felt fractionally wrong—as if someone had entered, moved nothing, and left.

Aura. Not stroke. Getting older.

He took three Advil from his desk drawer and swallowed them dry.

Just in case.

He picked up the small statuette he'd set out that morning and turned it in his hands.

Wish I'd had this for the shoot. Would've balanced the desk—nice counterpoint to the sandstone.

The statuette—a gift from a world-renowned archaeologist he'd treated for postpartum depression—was an earthenware Sumerian goddess. She'd also left him the latest issue of the Israel Exploration Journal, which he had meant to read and instead left buried beneath other proofs of his importance.

The relic—Astarte or Asherah—had likely been smuggled out of southern Iraq. He ran his thumb across the goddess's breasts—nipples worn smooth but still discernible.

Was she offering them—or caressing herself?

The "ideal" female form tilts with each era—fat, thin, fat, thin—like a pendulum hunting a false center.

In the '90s, it was Jane's look: anorexic.

He set the figure down beside a greeting card, its ornate script reading, "Thanks for curing me, Dr. Gold!"

"Cured" ... ha. She wasn't broken—only overwhelmed.

No one gets cured; we just get by. "Normal" is being abnormal—just not too often.

He slid the card into his top desk drawer.

First child. She has no idea how much more complicated her life just became.

Hell—that's how I afford these shoes. She'll be back.

"Life" is a spectrum disorder. A good therapist knows he's on that spectrum—and where he sits.

Do I?

He let the question pass before it could answer.

His eyes wandered to the sandstone plaque—

*Just walk a mile in his moccasins
Before you abuse, criticize and accuse.
If just for one hour, you could find a way
To see through his eyes, instead of your own muse.
— Mary T. Lathrap*

A gift from Professor Hanlon—encouragement then, accusation now. He had unearthed it and placed it front and center, not knowing why. Perhaps it reminded him of empathy—or of the distance between his shoes and anyone else's. The plaque whispered humility; the man behind the desk performed authority. Hanlon's words still rang in his head: "You've got a sharp mind and good instincts, but don't forget who you work for."

He had bristled quietly at the backhanded compliment.

A faint pressure gathered in his throat.

Ugh. Nausea again. It'll pass. It always does. No one has any idea what I'm going through. Not Rachel. Not even Bob.

Lately, Gold felt unsteady—even about things he once believed resolved.

Do we fault the oak for winding its way around a fence, chasing light?

Change is inevitable—never sudden, never simple.

All crumble eventually—like Ozymandias.

He set the sandstone back on his desk. Truth was, he'd never walk in anyone else's shoes—comfortable or not. It wasn't his style.

He snickered, glancing at his loafers.

Gold stood six feet tall, gray hair and a neatly trimmed beard. His slender face was marked by pensive gray-blue eyes—framed not only by wire-rimmed glasses, but by deep crow’s feet. Those who knew him understood: they weren’t smile lines.

He wore a tailored navy suit and a turquoise Brioni tie—Rachel’s gift for his forty-fifth birthday.

She’s got the artist’s eye. Her eyes—beautiful, blue, inviting.

Oh yeah. She just FaceTimed.

Gold took his phone and texted Rachel.

Sorry Rach. Prepping for a new patient who just got here. Gotta pay the bills! Love you.

Gold thought he was funny, though most jokes stayed trapped behind his lips. Friends called him dry; patients called him controlled. Rachel called it hiding.

“To avoid the wrong type of transference,” he would say, “which would compromise therapy.”

But he knew the other verdicts too: formal, cold, holier-than-thou. A know-it-all. At a college reunion, one old classmate called him a stick in the mud; another, liberated by too much wine, clarified that the stick was up his ass.

Still, the method worked. Patients came. Referrals came. The Atlantic came.

Gold had been a wunderkind once—Harvard, USC, UCLA, then Oxford, where he buried himself in late Romantic literature while interning with psychoanalyst Dr. Richard Carlyle at Cambridge. Carlyle had taught him that silence could be a scalpel. Gold had mistaken it for armor.

He returned to Los Angeles to teach at UCLA and build his practice, where he met, and eventually married, Rachel.

Over time, Gold built a lucrative private practice—its clientele ranging from anxious adolescents to world-class athletes and celebrities.

His Wilshire high-rise office overlooked UCLA: a modest reception leading into a spacious suite with a discreet rear exit.

At Rachel’s insistence, he’d installed a Ring video doorbell and smart lock at the reception entry. Often working late—seeing patients or writing—he kept the door locked. Rachel felt it was unsafe to have his office door unlocked during patient sessions.

His office was spacious, gray sisal wallpaper and bright white-framed window opening onto the broad sweep of the Los Angeles Country Club. It was sharp, pristine—like a commercial real estate listing, scrubbed of human warmth. Apart from a few of Rachel’s pieces, the space mirrored Gold himself: intellectual, cold, pompous. Even buried beneath an avalanche of art, sterility clung to the air.

Paintings, sculptures, framed prints jostled like guests at an overbooked salon—each clamoring to be seen, yet none finding a voice. Like him, the room was crowded with brilliance but hollow at its core—an identity performed, not inhabited.

The lights flickered; a pulse fluttered behind his right eye. He rubbed the ache away, then let his gaze settle on the books.

The few items atop his desk and credenza were chosen with care—to spark imagination, to provoke conversation. In one corner stood a freestanding alabaster of a nude young woman touching herself. It raised eyebrows, but he called it a conversation starter. In truth, less provocation than confession—desire carved in stone, denial disguised as art. Like him, it invited dialogue but concealed something raw beneath.

The Atlantic photographer insisted on removing it. Rachel had agreed; she never liked the piece. The figure was clearly a modern riff on Titian’s *Venus of Urbino*, but she challenged him when he bought it.

“Steven, I don’t know. In a gallery, maybe. But in your office? It’s sexist. Many of your female patients will feel objectified the second they see it.”

“That’s the point,” he said.

“If you like, I can sculpt you something more abstract... less graphic.”

But Gold insisted. He was drawn to it—that’s why she called it *Galatea*.

Rachel had once been his fiercest defender. Lately, even her silence felt like a verdict. Things had begun to tilt. Gold wasn’t an introvert—his ego wouldn’t allow it—but he was reserved, disliking the idea of “putting

himself out there.” He enjoyed what he called “running therapy.” He believed in brief therapy—fast, detached—where momentum passed for insight. He felt safest behind the bulk of his oversized desk—what Rachel, with a sculptor’s eye, mockingly dubbed “Hadrian’s Wall.”

She knows me so well—at least as much as I let her.

I sit, reading, trying to find meaning.

She takes a blank canvas, clump of clay, and creates hers.

She knows I hide—knows I need to. But we both hide.

From each other.

Me behind my wall; her, behind oil and clay.

On the other side of the “wall” sat his Harvard College captain’s chair—the *Veritas* crest gleaming from the back, as if to say it was the arbiter of ‘truth.’ Behind it, on a faded Serapi rug, a toile club chair sat angled toward its matching couch.

Gold focused on the books arranged with care along his ebony credenza—a satellite collection of the larger library at home. Each spine had been chosen to carry personal weight, each title a reflection of him, or at least of the man he wanted patients, photographers, even himself to see.

Know the man by his books.

There was no real system. He often read two, three—sometimes four—at once, then slid each volume wherever space allowed. He took pride in the collection, half-convinced the authors themselves would be flattered to find their works shelved in Steven Gold’s private library.

When not running therapy or playing golf, he drifted through used bookstores, hunting for odd covers and evocative titles—often as important to him as the contents themselves. He read only physical books, scoffing at electronic ones.

That’s not how a book is meant to be used. You have to feel it, smell it, hear the page turn.

In truth, he liked knowing the spines were visible. A library said things before he had to. He never considered that a personal bookshelf was less a collection than a catalogue—something uncomfortably close to a list of confessions.

He’d asked *The Atlantic* photographer to bump the f-stop, to keep the titles sharp in the background.

Clarity performs well on camera.

Gold watched the window light rake across the spines.

Shadows, even with no mass, no density, can still carry weight. Enormous weight.

My work is to name the shadows. Or at least make them visible.

But shadows rarely have clear boundaries. That is where the pain begins: where darkness bleeds into light, dimming it. Defining it.

Centered between his diplomas, the five-tiered bookshelf offered a curated glimpse into who Gold believed he was—and who he needed others to believe he was. Freud, Jung, Fromm-Reichmann, Becker, Sartre, Camus, Kierkegaard, Nietzsche, Dostoevsky, Milton, Blake, Kafka, Nabokov, Bulgakov, Huxley, Herbert, and Dick stood in uneasy judgment. *The Interpretation of Dreams. Civilization and Its Discontents. Moses and Monotheism. The Mask of Sanity. Fear and Trembling. The Brothers Karamazov. Paradise Lost. Frankenstein. The Master and Margarita. VALIS. The Trial. The Double. Pale Fire.*

Psychology leaned into theology; theology pressed against philosophy; philosophy slouched into fiction.

Most showed cracked spines, but a few—*The Sovereignty of Good, Pale Fire, and Being and Time*—remained unopened, still shrink-wrapped, as if for show.

Interspersed with the masters, as if members of the same club, were his own manuscripts and abandoned obsessions, some professionally printed, others spiral-bound or marked with fading revision tabs: *The Eighth Day, Dreams in Amber, Solip, Case Studies in the Absurd, and The Wisdom of Silence.*

On the bottom shelf, multiple copies of his academic foundations were preserved like relics of identity: his

pretentiously titled undergraduate honors thesis, *A Phenomenological and Neurophysiological Study of Schizophrenic Hallucinations, with an Original Hypothesis for the Etiology and Pathogenesis of Schizophrenia Based on the Mesolimbic Dopamine System*; his master's thesis, *Schizophrenic Hallucinations: A Psychodiagnostic Tool?*; and his doctoral dissertation, *The Psychosocial Correlates of Adolescent Substance Abuse*.

Gold's gaze often lingered there, on the bottom row, where his name lined up neatly beneath the masters above—proof, or perhaps pretense, that he belonged at all.

Substance Abuse... an entire year, wasted.

Gold clenched his jaw and exhaled, recalling when his doctoral advisor quit—after glancing only at the abstract.

"I will not allow you to associate my name with this—travesty! You're not just condoning—you're promoting teen drug abuse," his advisor had barked.

"Bullshit," Gold snapped. "You didn't even read it. I hypothesize that recreational 'abusers'—as I call them—score higher on self-concept and life satisfaction than non-users or abusers. They're the ones who feel accepted, who belong. Statistically, they're the norm. These days the strict abstainers are the true deviants."

He replayed the scene a hundred times, never admitting it was displaced aggression. He preferred "principle."

Unconsciously, he'd been angry at himself—masking an obsessive fascination with psychedelics beneath academic language. It was a craving—tempered by fear—to step inside an alternate world: Castaneda's *A Separate Reality*.

A strict non-user, Gold knew he was one of the deviants his study had labeled. He rationalized his abstinence: he didn't want to be one of *them*—those blissfully ignorant lemmings.

He'd been thoroughly indoctrinated—imprisoned in a parentally sanctioned, well-mannered world. He didn't realize those outbursts—then or since—were his unconscious self, rattling the bars of its cage. He'd always wrestled with ambivalence.

Maybe—if he'd been calmer—more honest, more mature, he could've convinced his advisor the research had value. And maybe he wouldn't have wasted a full year recruiting a replacement.

He sometimes wondered: how would his life have been different if he'd finished his doctorate a year earlier?

Bradbury would have called it too many butterflies. Who could say where that path might have led?

He gave himself a pass—clinging to the old refrain: *I wouldn't change a thing. Even if I could.*

No regrets. I'm still here.

He pretended that simply calling them "mistakes" made them truth—as if words alone could absolve him. Thinking too long on it left him queasy—more truth than he liked. Still, he was beginning to understand.

But understanding isn't the same as knowing.

I tell my patients—insight isn't the same as change.

My stomach's growling. I shouldn't have skipped lunch.

He glanced again at the statuette—his quiet proof that therapy, sometimes, actually worked. He needed that reassurance—especially now. In moments like this, no diploma, no certificate, no bookshelf or glowing profile could silence the questions. Or the doubts.

Sartre named it 'mauvaise foi.'

And Kaufmann nailed it: 'self-deception'.

The most dangerous form of mauvaise foi is certainty.

Freud knew Shakespeare was right: "truth will out." If not consciously, then neurotically.

Ha. That's why I'll always have work.

He leaned back and closed his eyes, as Pink Floyd's "Brain Damage" drifted from his iPad speakers.

He sang along gently. “There’s someone in my head, but it’s not me.”
His Apple Watch buzzed again. 6:25. Five-minute warning.

New patient: Samael Light.

Samael? Had to be a typo.

He couldn’t remember who had referred Light—or when. He had a few minutes to text Rachel—to let her know he’d be late again.

He always had new patients complete both the Suicide Probability Scale and the Psychological Screening Inventory. The forms only took twenty minutes, but new patients were always anxious. And he hated having to cut them off when their fifty minutes ran out.

Some first interviews had stretched past two hours.

When the floodgates open, you steer the boat. You don’t close the dam.

He pulled a new patient folder, clipboard, and leather-bound pad from the top left drawer.

If I call, she’ll ask questions. No time. Better to text.

Sorry Rach, I have to run a new patient so I’ll be late. Just eat and watch Rogue’s Gallery without me. I’ll grab something later. I’ll see it on DVR. Sorry. Lo—

The Ring chime sounded. The video flashed onto his iPad, cutting off his text.

For an instant, his own face hovered in the dark screen. Then it vanished, replaced by a blurred figure. He tapped the mic, then the unlock icon. “Come on in and have a seat... be with you in just a sec.”

Walls hold.

He closed Spotify, straightened his tie, popped a Tic-Tac.
The office lights flickered—twice, like a nervous blink.

Not a rolling brownout, I hope.

He walked toward the reception room door. A pressure tightened behind his right eye. When his hand closed around the doorknob, the room seemed to hold its breath.

So did he.

Jumped up too fast?

He released the knob.

PVC, probably. Not AFib. Right?

He lifted his wrist and tapped the ECG icon.

Normal sinus rhythm.

Right.

A thin, strikingly handsome man—mid-to-late thirties, jet-black hair—sat just left of the ficus, thumbing through the reception copy of *The Atlantic*. The moment he entered, the air shifted—not with sound, but with scent. *Roja Haute Luxe*—regal, enigmatic, unapologetically rare. Like aged parchment soaked in cognac.

Whoa. That’s what LeRoi Davis wears. Not an NBA star—more like a model. Or an actor.

He was wearing a black Armani suit with an exquisite black and burgundy-patterned Hermès tie. A matching pocket square completed the look—far too formal for a therapy session.

Light looked up. A flicker in his eyes—something oddly familiar and foreign.

Déjà vu—not mere familiarity. Primal. Like the mark of Cain: invisible, unmistakable. Ridiculous.

As he approached, he caught himself—sheepishly—noting the enviable gleam on Light’s black Prada

Oxfords.

He glanced at his own shoes, disappointed.

“Dr. Steven Gold,” he said. “Come in.”

CHAPTER FOUR

Truth Hides in Shadows

A man's truth is, first of all, what he hides.
— André Malraux, *Antimémoires*

Wednesday, early evening

Light, tall at six-foot-three, let the magazine fall to the table with effortless ease. As he stepped inside, his deep blue eyes locked on Gold's—steady, unsettling in their calm.

Rachel would remark on his symmetry. She'd love to sculpt that face—the hollows, the angles. She notices details—even the untouched books on my shelf.

He extended a manicured hand. A heavy gold ring on his middle finger caught the light. It was etched with symbols Gold couldn't place. Writing, perhaps.

She'd have focused on the ring if she were painting him.

Saturn's finger. A ring of judgment—heavy.

“Hello. Samael Light. Samuel, if you prefer—it's easier. A pleasure.”

“Nice to meet you, Samuel.”

His handshake was firm, steady—decisive. His voice, weirdly familiar.

A cold thread traced Gold's spine.

Gold turned toward his desk, expecting Light to take the captain's chair—as everyone did. Instead, Light strolled to the club chair, angled it just enough to break the room's symmetry, and sat—crossing one leg with the ease of command.

Gold's shoulders tightened.

The office was staged to frame him—diplomas and credentials aligned in view. A throne behind the desk. Control. Boundaries. Patients kept outside Hadrian's Wall.

And Light's move forced Gold to cross it, exposing himself.

What the fuck?

“You've curated some striking pieces, Dr. Gold.”

Gold grabbed his Ulysse notebook—a gift from Rachel—along with the intake folder, clipboard in hand as he crossed the room.

He perched awkwardly on the couch's edge, stealing a glance at Light.

I never sit on the couch.

Is this a power move?

“Thanks. My wife thinks it's gloomy for a psychologist's office.”

“Not at all,” Light replied. “I find it... stimulating.”

His gaze drifted across the diplomas, prints, and sculptures—pausing deliberately on the cluttered shelf.

“Asherah—the old Canaanite goddess?” Light asked, nodding at the statuette.

Gold softened, genuinely impressed. “Yes. Keen eye. A gift from a patient.”

“Fertility goddess. Let me guess—a gift from someone struggling to conceive? Clearly a success. I'm just a mythology nerd.”

Most patients wouldn't catch that.

“Ah—*Nebuchadnezzar* and *Newton*. I’ve always loved Blake.” Scanning the other wall he continued, “Moore’s *Woman Seated in the Underground*, fantastic.”

His gaze flicked to the sculpture. “Michelangelo’s *Slave*—perfect for a psychologist’s office.” Gold stiffened.

Most patients noticed the art. Light was reading it.

“That bust—the woman in the T-shirt—she looks so... serene. Peaceful. Like nirvana. Calming.” He smiled. “I love how art draws emotion out of you.

“I don’t recognize the signature, but that balance of imagination and technique—that’s rare. People think symmetry in art is easy—it’s not. Especially in such an angelic face.”

Rachel.

He looked across the room. “That oil painting—who’s the artist? She’s clearly gifted. It reminds me of Seurat’s *Le Mouillage à Grandcamp*—but painted with Van Gogh’s 1888 Arles palette. Personally, I never bought the xanthopsia theory.”

Gold lit up. “My wife would love hearing that. She created both—the bronze and the painting. Van Gogh’s a favorite of hers.”

An art student... or collector.

“She said the office needed at least one bright spot. Painted it for my first anniversary in this space.”

Light noticed the stylized R in the lower corner. “R?”

“Rachel.”

“Just the initial. Interesting. As if the name wants to be present, but not fully seen.”

Gold said nothing.

Light looked back at the painting. “But she has a strong emotional range. The textures hold more than the colors admit. There’s balance, yes—but beneath it, sadness.”

He’s perceptive.

“Thank you. You really do know your art. I think it helps people relax. Open up.” He gestured toward the *Slave*. “That one puzzles some.”

Light pointed to the large wall print. “Pollock’s *Lucifer*—fantastic. It’s always felt personal.”

Interesting.

“I’m impressed. Most people guess Pollock—but no one recognizes *Lucifer*.”

Light grinned. He rubbed his hand, turning his ring. “It’s always meant something to me.”

Definitely loaded. Worth revisiting—but not now.

This isn’t an art class.

Gold shifted in his seat.

“Okay, Samuel—let’s begin.”

He handed Light the clipboard.

“There’s a basic info sheet and a couple of short questionnaires—just a snapshot. Then we’ll talk.”

Remember—don’t promise more than you can deliver.

Beneath the clip lay a ballpoint pen, a two-page intake form, and two brief assessments.

Light withdrew a Montblanc fountain pen from his jacket and began writing—slow, deliberate, precise. Form by form. Page by page. His penmanship evoked *shodō*—disciplined, balanced, ceremonial.

Gold seized the moment to study him more closely.

Left-handed, like me... but his tie’s a half-Windsor. Shoelaces tied right-handed. Ambidextrous? Athletic? Balanced—or divided? Interesting.

Gold leaned closer, eyes drawn to the ring. Its faint, angular markings teased familiarity.

Runes? Norse? Older still? I’ll ask later.

Heat prickled across his scalp. Light was watching him.

“Want to see it?” Light asked, already sliding it from his finger. “Here. Take a closer look.”

Gold hesitated, then took it.

He turned it slowly between his fingers, thumb grazing the grooves. Sweat beaded along his hairline; he prayed Light wouldn’t notice.

Shit. My whole scalp’s probably glowing.

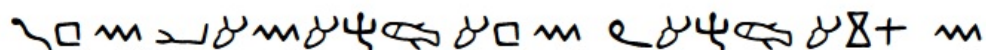
He exaggerated the motion, turning the ring slowly—hoping to divert Light’s gaze.

Hmm. Heavier than it looks... heavier than it should be.

“Wow. Heavier than I expected. Solid gold?”

Light shifted. “Yes—it’s gold. But it’s old... ancient. Needs a cleaning.”

Gold squinted at the ring. “These symbols—prehistoric?”



“Looks like something from a cave wall.”

Light said—too quickly, too shakily, “Ancient Hebrew.”

Gold raised an eyebrow. “Hebrew? I used to read it. Doesn’t look right.”

Light squirmed, clearly uncomfortable.

“What does it say?”

Light adjusted his posture. “I’m not sure. It’s a precursor to Hebrew—Proto-Sinaitic. One of the oldest known alphabets. Around 1900 BCE. But only a few archaeologists can read it. No one’s been able to fully translate it.

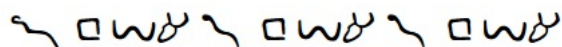
“A gift from my father. Sentimental, I guess.”

Light’s right hand moved instinctively to his finger—then froze. Bare. He let the arm fall quickly to his side.

But it meant something. Something deep.

He turned the ring again. Inside, another inscription—faint, nearly worn smooth.

“There’s something engraved here too... faded.”



Light shrugged, feigning nonchalance. “Yeah. Had it forever.”

Gold handed it back. “Well... must be important.”

Take the bait.

Light slid the ring back on, spinning it slowly. With each turn, calm returned—but the wrong kind: uneasy, suspicious, watchful.

OCD? He was sweating the whole time I held it. What’s he hiding... what’s it hiding?

Be careful.

Gold grabbed his notebook and leaned in. His pen felt heavy, as if resisting him. He wrote just one word—stark, bold.

RING.

He circled it hard.

An Anchor Chained to Your Heart

Nothing fixes a thing so intensely in the memory as the wish to forget it.

— Michel de Montaigne, *Essays*

Wednesday, evening

Light returned to the forms—paused just long enough to look up—then continued, mask firmly back in place.

He knows exactly what it says. No question. What's he hiding?

“Do all your patients fill these out, Dr. Gold?”

“Yes, standard procedure. They often reveal more than you’d expect—insights, directions to explore.”

Light raised an eyebrow. “I expected conversation, not checkboxes. But hey—you’re the doctor.”

Gold bristled—it wasn’t curiosity, it was a challenge.

Heat crept up his neck. He hated that Light might notice.

Ignore it. You’re the doctor. I don’t need to justify my ways to him.

Gold snapped his notebook closed and set it aside.

“Let me just turn the AC back on—it shuts off after six. Gets stuffy in here.”

He crossed to the thermostat. He could feel Light’s eyes boring into his back. He knew—he was losing the upper hand.

“You just about done?” he asked, a little too casually.

Rachel hates it when I’m passive aggressive. Brilliant, Dr. Gold—what the hell is wrong with me? Don’t start off being an asshole. Ha. Even though I’ll probably end up being one.

“Just finished. Here you go.”

Gold took the papers and stood. Rather than return to the couch, he angled the desk-side chair toward Light.

Light slowly swiveled the club chair to face him.

Now Light faced what Gold wanted every patient to see: his degrees, books, curated artwork—a quietly constructed wall of authority.

Not the chair I prefer—but now his view is right.

He skimmed the intake form.

Referral: blank.

Occupation: Attorney, Senior Partner, Legion Law—Appellate & Post-Conviction.

I know that firm. White-collar crime central. Crooks in suits—smug, polished sociopaths.

He looked up. “Samuel, what’s your area of practice?”

“Criminal law,” Light said, his expression unchanged. “I used to try cases—juries, cross-exams, all of it. But now I focus on appellate and post-conviction work. These days I’m mostly buried in briefs and transcripts. Court is rare now, and I’m usually done by four, which makes evenings easier. Mostly I work with the wrongly convicted. They deserve an advocate.”

Gold nodded. “Impressive. Noble—an appeal to a higher court. God’s work.”

Light’s Montblanc slipped from his fingers, clattering softly on the floor. He bent to retrieve it, then tucked it

into his suit pocket.

Gold noticed the mobile number and emergency contact lines were blank.

“You left some fields blank. I’ll need a number in case we reschedule—or if there’s a medical emergency. Completely confidential.”

Light shrugged lightly. “Oh, I believe you.” He leaned in, voice lowered. “Just got in from New York yesterday. Someone snagged my phone in the TSA line at JFK.”

“That’s annoying.”

Light nodded. “I’ll replace it tomorrow or Friday. New phone, new number—like starting over. Just haven’t had time to catch my breath yet.

“Coincidentally, last year, when I was in LA on business, my wallet was stolen.” He gave a dry laugh.

Gold chuckled. “If you were superstitious, you might worry about moving here. Someone—I forget who—said, ‘Coincidence is God’s way of remaining anonymous.’”

Light smiled faintly.

“I don’t know a soul here yet. But I’m healthy. Careful. Not superstitious.”

Likable. Polished. Something’s off beneath the surface—usually it’s fear.

Gold continued reading Light’s form. “Not married. You mentioned your father. Still alive? Want to list him as your emergency contact?”

Light hesitated. “He’s alive. But we’re not on speaking terms.

“We worked together for a long time—many years. Then... disagreements. A total break. He threw me out. I left. Never went back.”

As he spoke, Light’s thumb turned his ring—slow, rhythmic, automatic.

“He’s a judge. I haven’t seen him in... ages. Given how long we’ve been estranged, it doesn’t really make sense to list him.”

He gave a tight, knowing smile. “I’m sure we’ll get into it—your specialty, right?” He punctuated it with a wink.

What’s he hiding? Is he mocking me? Testing me?

Or something darker?

Gold stayed silent. He knew that smile—the kind that shut a door just as it began to open. The wink locked it.

He’s smart, wily. I’m going to have my work cut out for me.

Gold made a note.

Father

Let it go... for now. But circle back—this matters.

He skimmed the SPS and PSI results. Nothing remarkable—no suicidal ideation, no red flags. Very minor elevations in Alienation and Discomfort—common, expected.

That bothered him most. It didn’t read like someone seeking therapy.

Rehearsed.

The college chair was deliberate—just uncomfortable enough to unsettle. Shifting in it now, he felt it doing its job. Scooting back in the chair, he tried to cross his legs. “Samuel, why don’t you start by telling me what brought you in today.”

Therapy is a stealth mirror. People flinch.

Light cleared his throat and said, “What brings me here. Hmm. It should be easy to answer.”

Gold said, “Take your time. Sometimes it’s not so easy to put into words. Especially when dealing with feelings.”

No one starts with for the real reason.

Presenting problem—cover charge.

Countertransference. Emotional leakage.

Stay objective.

Light sat back casually glancing around the room.

“I’m not sure, Dr. Gold,” Light said softly. “I guess I’m not happy.”

Don’t jump in... not yet.

“Honestly... I don’t think I ever have been.”

He looked at Gold. “Maybe I’m naïve... wanting to feel wanted. Or loved.” Light sat back, as though he’d finished delivering finely rehearsed lines.

Rachel gets it. She reads people like novels. She remembers what’s happened—senses what’s coming. She’d have made a great therapist.

Empathic. Almost too sensitive for this world. Like that Don McLean line from “Vincent.”

And I barely qualify as sympathetic. I just mirror. They see my diplomas and assume I know. Assume I care. But I don’t. Not really.

I should’ve gone into medicine—pathology, maybe. No patients. No people. Just a microscope and the cold comfort of a final report, anchored in science.

He’d always told himself it was therapeutic necessity: objectivity, emotional neutrality, impartiality. In truth, it was just his nature—clinical detachment that bled into every relationship.

And it was getting worse.

Behind the mask of neutrality, faint echoes surfaced—flickers of feelings not fully his, not fully theirs.

Sometimes he imagined Carl Rogers—saint of unconditional positive regard—leaving sessions seething, feeling poisoned by all that restraint.

Gold’s method was different: no apologies. Don’t suppress your bias—face it. Own it. Use it.

His motto—*Figure it out and fix it*. Gold lived comfortably in black and white. But gray? Shadows? Not his domain.

Light continued, “People don’t know me. They have opinions—stories. About who I am.”

Gold nodded and said, “We all have to deal with other people’s opinions about us. It’s hard. Especially if they’re negative. Especially if we sense any truth in them.”

“Who I am.” Nobody knows who we are. Sometimes we don’t even know ourselves.

Light shook his head. “It’s all because of him.”

Gold often felt his thoughts were interrupted by his patients.

“Because of him?” Okay, don’t interrupt. Let him explain it.

“I just feel guilty. But I’m not a bad person. I shouldn’t feel this way. They make me feel like I did something... unforgivable.”

Light’s fingers returned to the ring—as if guilt lived there, coiled and dormant.

“They?”

Light leaned back, crossed one leg over the other, and exhaled slowly.

Rorschach logic. Ambiguity on ambiguity.

Gold held his breath.

Observe. Diagnose. Don’t expose.

He stared down at his shoes. “I’m not comfortable. I just want to feel normal.”

His hand returned to the ring—twisting it like a silent rosary of guilt.

“My father started that fire,” he said softly. “And he’s still feeding it.”

Gold said nothing.

His father. Well, that didn't take long.

Hanlon always said, Speak too soon and it's all collisions—noise, static. Shut up and listen.

Silence pressed in. Gold didn't trust it. His mind kept fidgeting.

But spontaneity dies when we wait our turn. Truth rarely survives that silence.

Gold leaned forward—thumb beneath his chin, forefinger curled over his lips. A gesture of self-restraint, pressing silence into his own face.

He restrained himself, only murmuring gently, “Go on.”

“We'll get into the details later, I know. But growing up—my father made me do things. Things I knew were wrong. I couldn't understand how he didn't know. He had to know.

“They were sinister.” Pain crossed Light's face—undeniable, unguarded.

What the hell?

Was this sexual abuse?

“I think he did know—didn't care. That's him. He knows everything. Really only cares about himself.”

His hands clenched—tight, white-knuckled.

“After what felt like forever, I couldn't take it anymore. I left. Then I became the villain. Everything got pinned on me—like it was all my fault. That's why I can't look at him. I can't even talk to him... not anymore. I've been misunderstood my whole life—because of him.”

And yet—you wear the ring. Forged from guilt itself.

What did you do?

“I know you worked with Dr. Carlyle at Cambridge. Thought maybe a little Freudian lineage could help with my father issues.”

Carlyle was upset I never took to his couch. He had suspicions.

“Just to be clear—I never wanted to kill him. I didn't.”

Kill him?

He paused—then leaned in, just a little too close.

“But... if he'd asked me to?” Light hesitated. “I don't know...”

“I might have.”

No father would ever put that on his son.

Gold shifted in his chair—uncomfortable. Provoked.

Light continued. “If it's not his idea? Forget it. If he says it's good? It's good.

“He's a narcissistic, vindictive bully—controlling, sadistic, homophobic.”

Gay? Or accused of it?

“You probably think I'm being dramatic. I'm not. You don't know him. But if you did—if you knew him like I do—you'd know he's worse than all that.”

Hard to believe this is still the intake. Unreal.

“For years, I kept asking—why doesn't he love me? Shouldn't a father's love be unconditional?”

Yes. Shouldn't it? But my father had his terms.

“Eventually, I realized—he only loves one person unconditionally: himself.

“He disgusted me. I hated him. I couldn't live with him—or work with him—any longer. I couldn't live in his

world anymore. So I left.”

Disgust is intimate. Hate even closer. It requires history, hope, effort.

You don't waste hate on strangers. You reserve it for someone you once wanted—needed—to love you.

But he's not ready for this yet.

He's wounded. Still searching for love, in spite of rejection.

The ring? A relic. A loop of unfinished grief. Tarnished hope.

“He saw it as betrayal. And because he's so egotistical, so vindictive—he made sure I took the fall.”

Something's missing.

“I know I'm no saint. You can't be—when survival means obedience. I couldn't say no to anything he asked. I wanted to. I knew what he had me do was wrong. But saying no... to him... that just wasn't an option. He knew I'd do it. Choice was an *illusion*.”

Choice. Always the word they use.

Let him talk. Don't dam the flood.

“My biggest flaw? Honesty. Odd, I know—for me—a criminal lawyer. But I swear, it's true. Everyone assumes I lie. But honesty—that's what ruined us. That's what ended me—with him.”

Gold swallowed his urge to interrupt. “Mmm hmm,” he murmured.

“He shifts it all onto me. I'm the fall guy—that way he keeps his halo—I've lost mine.”

Light's voice hardened. Louder. “I'm the evil one. The liar. The troublemaker.”

Angered. “They believe him—every time—they have to. If you knew what he made happen—what he ordered—you'd never dare question him. If I weren't his son, I'd be dead.”

That escalated.

“You know this, Dr. Gold—it's hypnosis. Repeat something often enough, from enough mouths, and no matter how insane, it becomes truth.

Their truth.

“And the truth is—he's insane. Arrogant. Egotistical. A megalomaniacal bastard.

“I never want to see him again.”

And yet here you are. Talking about him.

“They trust him. Blindly. Believe every word.

“Thinking's harder. Question him—and you're punished. Branded forever.

“Sorry, I know I'm ranting. But I swear—I've been honest. I'm telling the truth.”

“Your truth.” Honest—‘to the best of your knowledge,’ as your affidavits say. “The truth” might be another matter.

Gold remained silent, fingertip whitening against his lips. The instinct to jump in—to interpret—held in check. After the taut silence, Light stared—hungry for something: a nod, a flicker of belief, anything.

Facts feel secondary. Belief's already doing the work.

Reconciliation? Is that his goal?

Not unless he's open to seeing things differently. And this didn't happen overnight.

Gold shifted forward and finally spoke. “Samuel, you've got a rare kind of self-awareness. Most people take weeks, months to open up like this. You seem to understand what brought you here. I appreciate your openness—it's never easy.”

Win him first. Don't challenge him yet.

Gold shifted in his chair. “I appreciate it. Most people don’t want the truth. They’re afraid of it. Like *A Few Good Men*—they can’t handle it. Too uncomfortable.

“People prefer affirmation—even if it isn’t real. That’s confirmation bias. That’s why people gather their ‘truth’ from friends, echo-chamber podcasts, or their go-to network—anything that validates what they already believe. Birds of a feather. Nobody likes being challenged—especially fathers.”

Gold picked up the assessments again, flipping through them slowly. He double-checked the PSI’s Social Nonconformity score.

Normal. Minor elevations in Alienation and Discomfort—common enough.

Gold said, “People hate discord. You hear a bad note—you flinch. In music or in life, uncertainty sets nerves on edge. That’s anxiety: a future you can’t predict or control. A jigsaw puzzle with a missing piece—infuriating. Some people jam in the wrong one, just to feel whole. Pretend it’s complete.”

One reason for the high divorce rate.

“We crave closure. Ambiguity rattles the soul. We want resolution—no loose ends. To believe everything’s fine. Just... as it should be. It’s not unlike religion.”

Should I go here?

Light leaned forward, his eyes sharpening.

“How is it like religion, Dr. Gold?”

Why not. He’s sophisticated enough.

“Belief is thinking you know. Faith is binary—on or off.

“Agnosticism? I’m not sure it truly exists.” He gave a faint smile.

“People either believe—or they don’t.”

Light raised a hand, gently objecting. “But Dr. Gold, a lot of people say they don’t know what God is.”

Gold nodded, energized. “Exactly! They believe—they just don’t comprehend. I don’t understand quantum physics, but I don’t doubt it exists. I accept it’s just beyond me—beyond my understanding.

“That’s why you can’t argue someone out of their religion—it’s baked in since childhood. Once someone believes, it’s almost impossible to convince them they don’t really know.”

Light smiled knowingly.

Gold continued, “Hope is wanting to believe—even when the facts suggest otherwise. Wanting trumps knowing. No one wants to discover they’re wrong—it creates cognitive dissonance, threatens belief. In their mind, it could unravel everything.

“So they double down. Everyone else is mistaken, misreading, or lying.”

Light nodded in agreement.

Am I running too fast? No—he’s still with me.

“We’re judged by what we do. Intentions don’t count. Only actions register.”

Light’s expression softened, a flicker of amusement surfacing. “Preaching to the choir, huh? That’s my job too—juries for me, patients for you.”

Gold gave a slight nod. “Exactly. We’re told how to act—what to be. But we don’t know what we really want, only what we’re supposed to want. That gap? That’s what drives the neurosis—questioning everything.”

This is his hour—not mine. Save it for Bob. Wrap it up.

“You’re right of course. And I do want to hear more about your father. You’ve shared a great deal already—we’ll explore it, piece by piece.”

What evil did he actually do?

“Samuel—and I apologize, I tend to talk too much—I’d like to revisit something. You used a powerful word: ‘evil.’ What do you mean by that? Did you actually do something wrong, or were you just told you had?”

Shit. One question—not a list. Life’s not a multiple-choice quiz. Don’t hand him the

answers. Make him earn them.

Light slouched back with a heavy exhale—something in him collapsing.

“Everyone,” Light said softly. “Judged. Convicted. Sentenced.”

A grimace flickered across his face. His eyes—pained and distant—made him look smaller, older.

“I was told—commanded—to do things I knew were wrong. Morally wrong. I hurt people—people who didn’t deserve it.”

He swallowed hard. “I had no choice. I had to obey.”

“My father didn’t allow questions. But I knew—what he asked, what he commanded—was wrong. And I’m sure he knew it too.”

There he goes again—spinning that ring.

“A few times, I tried to fake it—pretend I’d done his bidding, hope he’d forget. But when I finally disobeyed... the punishment was severe.

“Even that didn’t bother me. I deserved it—for disobeying him. The punishments didn’t break me—I was used to them. I didn’t care about myself. I was numb.

“It was seeing others hurt—people I tried to protect. After a while, I couldn’t take it anymore. Too many people were getting hurt. So I stood up to him.”

Severely punished? And he’s a criminal attorney. Who the hell is his father—El Chapo?

“I confronted him—and didn’t back down. I’d never seen him so furious. He never gave explanations. Just: ‘Do it. Because I said so.’”

Sounds familiar.

“But he lost it when I asked, ‘Who are you?’ He thundered, ‘I am!’ I said, ‘You are what? Look at yourself. Look at what you’ve become.’ He screamed, ‘You weren’t there! Where were you when I laid the foundation? You can’t understand.’

“There was no reasoning with him. And more people were going to get hurt. So I quit—I left for good. He blamed everything he’d commanded me to do on me. It wasn’t fair. But I still feel guilty. And I’ve been in hell ever since.”

Gold sat back, letting it all wash over him. He waited, but Light slumped forward, head bowed—dejected, drained.

Despair is no place to pause. Time for something positive. Hopeful.

Light sat silently. Waiting.

Win him over. Give him hope. Be human. Be kind.

My problem. My curse of knowledge—everyone thinks you know... and you don’t.

Gold inhaled deeply, held it briefly, then released it slowly. He leaned forward, locking his focus on Light’s deep blue eyes.

“Thank you, Samuel. I appreciate your honesty. I’m sorry you went through that—it sounds harrowing. I don’t know the specifics, but the fact that you held yourself together... that says a lot. Nobody grows up without scars. And the emotional kind? They cut deeper than flesh—and rarely heal completely.

“Guilt isn’t what most people think. It masquerades as one thing—but there are two kinds, and the difference matters.

“Guilt has a way of choosing the wrong address. The mind sends it where it can survive looking at it, not always where it belongs.”

I’m lecturing. Get to the point. Don’t lose him.

“First, there’s true guilt. You’ve done something wrong, you know it, and others do too. That’s the guilt you should feel—it belongs to you. It reflects reality.”

Light accepted this with a slight nod.

“Guilt is an anchor, chained to your heart—silent, heavy, inescapable. You feel it physically, dragging you down. You can withdraw, hide, even run away—but it stays with you. When you try to make amends, it always lingers.

“And even when you forgive yourself, you always have the scars.

“So the goal isn’t always to escape the weight. Sometimes it’s just learning how to carry it.”

Okay. Give him a minute to let that sink in. Looks like he’s following.

“Then there’s neurotic guilt—the kind that creeps in when you’re blamed for something that wasn’t your fault. When someone tells you it’s your fault. You know it isn’t, but you feel like crap anyway. Being blamed for something you didn’t do—or never intended—that’s the kind of crazy-making that breaks people. You only *feel* guilty because someone told you that you *should*.”

Light nodded in agreement but said, “No disrespect, Dr. Gold—but you say that like someone who’s never had to carry it.”

Gold bristled, flushed slightly, and shifted uncomfortably on the couch. “I’m talking clinically. Everyone suffers at its hands, by its weight.”

Guilt chooses the wrong address.

Inherited guilt—my father’s silence.

Neurotic guilt—Jane’s shadow.

Jane’s shadow wasn’t memory so much as atmosphere.

A living room—too many people, too much wine. The brunch after his and Rachel’s engagement party.

Laughter spilling over itself. Glasses clinking. Everyone watching everyone else.

Jane had dropped onto the couch beside him—close enough to register, not close enough to accuse.

Bare shoulder brushing his sleeve. Coincidental. Of course.

He didn’t move away.

“So,” she said, smiling without warmth, eyes already scanning the room. “You’re a psychiatrist.”

“Psychologist,” he corrected her.

“Makes sense. You have that air.”

She shifted—just slightly—her bare thigh, exposed beneath her mini-skirt, pressed against him.

Not enough to draw notice. Enough to register.

“I feel at ease, comfortable, like I’d be willing to... open up completely.”

He’d glanced at Rachel across the room—radiant, claimed, unassailable.

Jane followed his gaze and laughed softly. “Relax. I’m not trying to steal anything.”

He flushed.

A pause. Then, lightly: “I already know who wins.”

She crossed her legs—slow, deliberate. For him? For the room? For the men who noticed. For the women who pretended not to.

“I just like knowing I could,” she added. Almost kindly.

It wasn’t really a flirtation—more of a wager.

He’d said nothing. Silence had protected him before—or let him believe it had.

Later, Rachel would ask, casually, “Jane talk to you much?”

And he would answer, truthfully and falsely, “Not really.”

Now the memory returned with surgical clarity.

Not her sexuality—but what it was trying to secure.

Light coughed, politely. Gold blinked, back in the room. Light was watching—too still, too alert—as if he’d sensed the shift.

Where was I?

“Oh yeah. You try to fix it, but nothing changes. That’s when guilt becomes a trap—no off-ramp, no exit. You keep trying to fix it. But fix what, how? You didn’t break it. That’s what drives you mad.”

Light nodded again, slowly.

“We start to doubt everything—especially ourselves. Maybe we don’t even know ourselves. Maybe we can’t trust ourselves. So how do we make amends? How do we fix it?”

“Why do we still feel awful after apologizing? Because manipulation keeps changing the rules while we’re still trying to play.”

Light nodded. “Yes.”

Good.

“That’s the breeding ground for neurosis. It becomes a scream in your unconscious—What did I do wrong? I can’t live like this. So we grasp for relief—but it never comes. Apologizing doesn’t fix it. We start hiding from ourselves.”

Rachel, the only one who ever tried to unchain me by believing in me. By loving me.

Gold cleared his throat. “Some believe guilt is the prime mover—the great engine of human action. I’m not sure I’d go that far. But guilt? It makes some people act... or freeze.”

“But Dr. Gold, like you said, ‘we feel guilty after apologizing.’ Sometimes I just feel shitty.”

Good, he’s with me. Emotions are resonating—but don’t overload him. Let it breathe another minute.

“Yes, Samuel. Humans feel. But things make us feel. *Feelings* happen to us—we don’t choose them.

“But how we handle it, what we do with our feelings, that’s emotion. *Emotions*... emotions are what we do with our feelings. Often automatically.”

Check in—keeping up?

“Does that make sense to you? Is this too much at once?”

Light nodded. “No, it’s not too much. It’s cerebral—but it makes sense. Sounds like mine’s neurotic guilt.

“I can’t let go. So how do I make it stop?”

A great question—if his hands are clean. But nobody’s are spotless.

“First step: name what you feel. Therapy is language and honesty; without words, feeling stays trapped in the body.

“When we say we ‘know how someone feels,’ we’re guessing—reading cues, not minds. Someone says something cruel. I feel hurt. I respond—with anger, sarcasm, withdrawal, maybe tears.

“If you did something wrong—objectively—you have to confront that guilt. If your guilt is earned, you’re serving time—for a real crime. The work then is redemption. But if you were made to feel at fault for something you didn’t do, then my job is to help you respond—not with symptoms—but with clarity.”

Light sat upright, attentive—as if in a classroom.

Okay. The horse is dead. Enough.

I can hear Oster saying, “Lecture less and listen more.”

Ha. Guess I didn’t listen... to him.

“Sorry—bit of a firehose moment. Old habits. I used to be an adjunct lecturer.”

“I could tell.” Light smiled. “But I enjoy it.”

Gold flushed slightly but said, “Well, I hope that all made sense. I just wanted to define terms—to show you how I work.

“Take a breath. Sit with your thoughts. Your feelings aren’t wrong. They just... are. They’re real. They’re valid.”

What things did you do?

“It’s normal to feel uneasy. This is all new. I’m new. Take your time. Be real. Be honest. I’m listening.” Light’s knee bounced. His fingers spun the ring—restless, compulsive.

“Thank you, Dr. Gold,” Light said. “I appreciate it—I really do. I think I followed it all. It makes sense.”

He paused.

His voice dropped, barely a whisper. “And now... I feel guilty.”

He glanced down.

“Not because I lied. I told you the truth. But not the whole truth. I left something out.”

He bowed his head, fingers clenched on the armrest.

Gold leaned forward, heart clenched. One finger curled over his lips—the listening pose. A silent vow: just listen.

Light slumped forward. The overhead light painted him like a chiaroscuro portrait—half-lit, half-lost, suspended between confession and concealment.

He stopped spinning the ring.

His voice barely escaped.

“My real name is... Satan.”

Gold sat silent. He had expected confession, pathology, performance—something. Not this. His skin tightened, as if his body had understood before his mind could object.

END OF PREVIEW

Thank you for reading this preview of *A Question of Balance*.

A Question of Balance is a completed 95,000-word novel of literary psychological suspense and is currently seeking representation.

Reader comments are welcome though the contact form at:

<https://www.aquestionofbalance.com>

Essays on psychology, identity, guilt, belief, and the nature of authorship can be found at:

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