

Chapter 1

“I’ve been the fat guy my whole life and I’ve hated myself for it. I mean *hated*.”

A long pause. “The sickest thing is, you know how I handled the hate? I ate more. I ate when I was sad, I ate when I was lonely, I ate when I was bored. I’ve been through so many diets, I must’ve lost a million pounds by now. But I always put them back on. And more. Even when I was young, I was the fat kid in school. The others used to say some pretty mean stuff. Names that still cut me to the bone. But nothing they called me could have been worse than what I said to myself. A little over a year ago I actually thought about blowing my brains out. The only reason I didn’t is because I couldn’t do it to my Mom.” Another long pause. “But that was a year ago. Before Larry. Before all this.”

Justin McDonald, a good-looking, slightly overweight guy in his early thirties, looked at the five other people seated around the table, his voice beginning to shake with emotion. “In the six months since we’ve been meeting, I’ve dropped thirty pounds. And kept them off. And most important ...” Justin took a moment, trying to keep it together, “I don’t hate myself anymore.” He continued, on the verge of tears. “And I thank all of you for that. And most of all,” he turned to a well-dressed, graying man in his fifties, “I thank Larry.”

Larry Brennan sat at the head of the long, mahogany table in the conference room of the Lucky Charm Casino. He gave Justin a warm smile, but no words came. Larry’s own throat was choked with emotion. Even if he could speak, Larry wasn’t entirely sure what he would say. Others surrounding Justin — Phyllis, Sharon, Frank, and Nicole patted Justin’s arm and offered him Kleenex. Larry watched them, overcome with feelings. Pride, camaraderie — but above all, shame.

Just outside the conference room could be heard the musical undulations of the slot machines, an occasional jubilant cheer from a hot craps or roulette table. The Lucky Charm was no Bellagio or Wynn. No dolphins or pirate ships or gondoliers paddling canals between shops selling Prada and Rolex and Ferragamo. Just a welcoming neighborhood joint where locals and tourists who wanted to play away from the glitz and crowds of the Strip knew they could come for a good time, a decent meal, a friendly dealer. And more often than not, a sincere smile and warm hello from the man who owned the place, Larry Brennan.

Larry had built the Lucky Charm with his own hands. He hadn't laid a brick or pounded a nail, but without him the casino would have dried up and blown away long ago. Larry's honesty, genial manner, and genuine concern for others took the Lucky Charm from a rundown gambling hall into the friendly, clean, quite profitable establishment it was today.

People liked Larry Brennan, and with good reason. Intelligent, introspective, down-to-earth, a loving husband and devoted father, Larry had that increasingly rare quality — integrity. He had it in spades. Each of the other five people at the table loved and admired Larry, again with good reason. Like Larry, they each had much to be thankful for. And like Larry, they each had battled food addiction their entire lives. But it was Larry who had brought them together to try to help each other, it was Larry who had initiated the idea of “The Last Cookie Club.”

The name referred to the crossroads that Larry had identified as the “Cookie Moment,” that defining choice at 3 a.m., when despite all your vows and willpower and learning and diets and twelve-step programs, your world has fallen apart and you're

standing in the kitchen, already filled with self-loathing, holding a cookie (or a slice of pizza or a bag of potato chips or whatever). You know that you're alone and nothing's stopping you, and you also know full well that one cookie leads to another — leads to ten — leads to a four-week binge — and you've been down that road a zillion times before and promised yourself you'd never do it again. Yet there you are and the Cookie Moment is asking you simply — what are you gonna do? More than anything, Larry Brennan wanted to help the others at the table, and more to the point, help himself survive that moment.

The other members of the Last Cookie Club half-jokingly referred to Larry as their “sensei,” a martial arts term of honor for teacher or “wise one.” Through a lifetime of trial and error, success and failure, Larry had finally begun to gain some understanding of what it takes to survive the Cookie moment. It isn't willpower. As anyone who has ever tried to withstand temptation in any form can attest, willpower fails. It is a function of the psyche and ultimately the psyche revolts. Every time. The secret to living with food addiction isn't hypnosis or psychotherapy or medication, although each of these tactics has their place. No, Larry had wisely sought to go back to the roots of compulsive eating. To address the cause, not the symptoms.

Larry had discovered through much experience that there seemed to be two sides to the mind. A good side and an evil side. It was very simple to stay on course with all of his various eating programs when the good side of the mind was active. However when the evil side was active, it seemed like the strength of wild horses pulled Larry towards his binges. Once a craving began, it did not matter what he had learned in the past or how logical it seemed to eat sensibly, he simply could not stop his insane food bingeing. If

only there were a way to quiet the evil side of the mind when it was in its rage, then life with food would be easy.

He had identified three basic, necessary human needs for happiness and a well-balanced life: a need of belonging to something, a need to be loved, and a need to fully self express through the spoken word. Larry believed that people with an eating addiction are not heard by others; either because others do not want to hear about their struggles, or due to shame and embarrassment, food addicts are unable to speak about their inner torture. Larry had seen that once all three needs were met, lives began to blossom. Destructive things, like food addiction, started to fall away. Larry had also learned, the hard way, that no one can beat compulsive eating, or any addictive behavior, alone. You need to fight it for something larger than yourself. All of which had given Larry the inspiration to form the Last Cookie Club. The destructive behavior he knew so well he had observed in a handful of friends and acquaintances, who were now the other members of the club. He realized the club could help them all belong, feel loved, find an outlet for expression. And above all, he believed the club would give them all a reason larger than themselves to prevail and overcome their addictions. Larry knew that having others depend on him to be their leader helped him as much or more than it did them. And the most gratifying part was, it actually was working, which should have filled Larry with a great sense of accomplishment and pride. But instead, at that moment on that day, Larry Brennan felt like the biggest fraud in the world.

Sharon Morton, a woman who exuded sexy playfulness despite a certain amount of middle-aged spread, was the next to speak. “That was beautiful, Justin. And brave. The things you said, I’ve felt a hundred times before. We all have.” Nods from others around

the table. Sharon took a moment to compose her thoughts. “I’ve had a really good week, too. A good month, actually. Randy’s on the road again, surprise, surprise, but I’ve been able to work through it without hitting the dessert freezer at Costco. Or Larry’s video poker machines outside. Or the bar at the country club. Or the shoe stores in the Fashion Show mall.” She thought for a second, “God, I’m a mess!” Laughs from the others.

Larry had lost the energy to even pretend to smile, but fortunately no one else had noticed. He realized his intense despair was making it difficult for him to breathe. More than anything, he just wanted the meeting to end.

“So, I’m doing well,” Sharon continued. “Thanks.” She looked toward Frank King, a barrel-chested guy about Larry’s age sitting to her left.

“I’m next, huh? Didn’t realize we had such a firm commitment to always going in clockwise order.” In typical fashion, Frank was deflecting his nervousness with quick humor. “Well,” he said, fiddling with a Waterman pen on the table before him, “I can’t match Justin in the drama department, that’s for sure. But I do know what he’s talking about. You’re all probably aware I wasn’t that keen on coming to these meetings in the first place. In fact, I told Larry if he brought it up to me one more time, I was gonna slap him with a restraining order.” More laughter. “And then when I realized being healthy meant eating rabbit food, y’know, fresh fruit, veggies, easy on the meat and refined carbs ... it all made me want to run as fast as I could to the Planet Hollywood buffet and load up on as much prime rib and cake as I could carry back to my table. And truth is, I have a time or two.”

Despite his inner turmoil, Larry looked at his friend with empathy and understanding. He knew all too well that the often stated fear of “rabbit food” was just

part of the psyche's bag of tricks. The mind becomes threatened when it imagines eating healthy food forever. And then the self-deception and panic kicks in. He'd felt it himself a thousand times. If you're the only one at the party or the restaurant or Thanksgiving eating healthily, suddenly you're viewed as "different," not one of the "gang." Immediately your need to belong is threatened, along with your need to be loved and to fully self express. Once you find yourself in the throes of food addiction, you don't want to eat nutritious food because of your intense, overwhelming self-loathing. In other words, exactly what Larry was feeling that very moment.

Frank fiddled with the pen. "But I've been trying. And I gotta say, you guys are really helping. At first it was kinda like I didn't want to mess up because I didn't want to have to come here and lie about it. But now ..." Frank took a pause. The touchy-feely stuff didn't come easily to him, and the others knew it. And they accepted it, even loved him for it. "It's really helped. I'm down a few pounds, but more importantly, I haven't been eating every time something goes wrong or I get down on myself for whatever reason. And that's pretty huge for me." Looks of support from the others. "By the way, that's not a fat joke." Chuckles.

All eyes now turned to Phyllis Gates, a handsome black businesswoman in her mid-forties. Phyllis, looking a little weary, gave a heavy sigh. "I guess I'm doing okay. This thing with my Mom, well ... as you all know better than anyone, it really threw me for a loop. But I'm not eating. Okay, I did have a little date a few nights ago with a couple of guys named Ben and Jerry. But I was able to drop them like a bad habit. And that's big for me. I still want to eat. I'm dying to eat. But so far, I'm not. I hope next

week I can sit here and tell you the same thing. Other than that, well,” she said with a sad smile, “I guess I’m gettin’ by.”

There was a moment of silence and Larry realized the others were waiting for him to weigh in. His own little joke did nothing to lift his spirits. Despite wanting more than anything to get up and leave, Larry played the part the others had grown to expect from him. “That’s good Phyllis, really good,” Larry said, his eyes down, avoiding anyone’s gaze. “You all seem to be having a good week, and I’m really happy for you.”

Larry looked up to see Nicole, an attractive dark-haired woman in her late twenties, studying him. Of all people. He hoped that her well-honed professional powers of perception hadn’t detected his inner turmoil and gut-wrenching guilt. “So, Nicole,” Larry ventured, “what’s been going on with you?”

For a moment Nicole didn’t speak. When she did, Larry’s heart sank. “I’m actually getting the feeling that something’s up with you, Larry. Am I wrong?”

All eyes now turned to Larry and in his mind, they burned like lasers. He hoped and wished and prayed that Nicole would let it go. But no such luck.

“It would be very helpful if you shared with the club.”

Larry knew he was busted. Seconds away from a clean break. His mind raced with possible ways to deflect her attempts. He had no tolerance for dishonesty, especially his own, especially with these people in this place. Right now the last thing he wanted was scrutiny; all he sought was to be left alone. But Larry Brennan had too much honor to lie. With enormous difficulty, still too ashamed to make eye contact with the others, he began.

“I know,” he said haltingly, “that you all look up to me as your leader, and I’ve certainly done my part to further that notion. I sit here before you week after week, dispensing my pearls of wisdom, thinking I’ve actually figured out some of the answers to this addiction that we’re all trying to beat. I talk a good game, and most of the time I practice what I preach, but the truth is ...” the rest of the sentence did not come easily. But he had to say it, he had to rid himself of the poison. “Tonight, I’m a fraud.” A quick glance at the others revealed their looks of surprise and concern. “I’ve been eating. I’m in the middle of a major binge right now and have been for nearly three weeks. I’ve put on twenty pounds, and I’ve had to switch to my fat pants. I’ve been eating and hating myself and eating anyway and I don’t know why.” His brave voice began to quaver with emotion. “I don’t know why.” With a sigh, he pressed on, trying to fight back tears.

“The damn thing is, I was truly starting to think I might have this thing knocked. But I don’t.” He managed a bitter laugh. “I know all the techniques and theories, I know all the right things to say and do — but the truth is, I’m barely hanging on by my fingernails here and I don’t know what to do about it.” The others had seen Larry get emotional before, they’d seen him empathize with and support others, they’d seen him laugh and embrace a friend in trouble ... but until that moment, none of them had seen Larry Brennan cry. “This is such an impossible thing to get control of,” he said, voice shaking, “and every time I think I understand how to deal with it — ” Larry tried his best to gain control of his emotions, but it was impossible — “I fail. And the thing is, I’m questioning my worthiness as your leader. I should be the happiest one here,” he continued, the tears welling in his eyes, “but I’m the exact opposite. I’m losing it — and

... I need ... your help.” Then Larry sat in silence, tears staining his cheeks, ashamed, embarrassed, not the least bit sure what was going to happen next.

If someone laughed at him, he'd perfectly understand. If one by one, they all stormed out, he wouldn't blame them for a second. If they regarded him as a sham and a failure and a con artist, so be it. For what seemed like an eternity, the room was silent. And when he could stand it no more, Larry finally ventured a look up at the faces of the others. What he saw gave him chills. Every single person at the table, man and woman, was crying. Not tears of disappointment or betrayal, but tears of compassion and understanding.

Phyllis was the first. She stood and crossed to Larry, and with watery eyes filled with gratitude and devotion, hugged him. Sharon was next, and then Justin and Nicole and even Frank, and in a heartbeat the entire Last Cookie Club had drawn close around Larry, crying, supporting him, protecting him, loving him.

“Larry Brennan,” said Phyllis finally, as she held him close, “you could never be a failure. You saved my life.”

“Me, too, bud,” said Frank quietly, “me, too.”

As Larry saw their faces and heard their quiet sobs, he knew he could keep going. In an instant, he realized that this was what the club was all about. Walking forward arm in arm. Together, no matter how hard or cruel the road. And if any one of them stumbled, even Sensei Larry, five sets of hands were waiting to pull their friend back up. Larry finally understood that without each other, they truly would have nothing. They'd all be alone, completely, crushingly alone, just as they had been before he'd had the idea to pull the club together.

In an instant, he realized that this is what the club was all about. Lisa was right. The Last Cookie Club was a key to his salvation. And for the first time since he could remember, Larry actually dared to hope that one day soon, his addiction would no longer be able to call him its prisoner.

Larry, humbled and grateful, took a moment to remember what life had been like just a year before, before the Last Cookie Club was even a glimmer in his eye. It seemed like so long ago...

