WAS IT ABUSE?

OR JUST ANOTHER TOXIC RELATIONSHIP?



Ashling Podmore

ASHLING PODMORE

Was It Abuse?

Or Just A Toxic Relationship?

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Read This Bit First

If you're in danger right now

UK: ring 999. If you can't speak, cough or tap the phone, then press 55 when you're asked. You'll be put through to the police.

US: ring 911.

If you need to talk to someone today

UK: National Domestic Abuse Helpline, run by Refuge. 0808 2000 247. Free, confidential, 24 hours a day, every day. It won't show on an itemised BT phone bill. Live chat at nationaldahelpline.org.uk, Monday to Friday 10am to 10pm, weekends 10am to 6pm.

US: National Domestic Violence Hotline. 1-800-799-7233. Free, confidential, 24/7, with interpreters. Text START to 88788. Chat at thehotline.org.

You don't need to have decided anything before you ring. You

don't need to know if it counts. You can ring and just ask a question.

And before you start

I'm not going to tell you to leave. That isn't what this book is for, and it isn't my decision to make.

I don't know your situation, your children, your money, or how dangerous he is. You do. You know things about keeping yourself safe that nobody on the outside will ever see.

This book is here to help you understand what's happening. What you do with that is up to you, and you can take as long as you need.

Whatever you decide, you don't have to work it out on your own. The people on the numbers above can help you make a safety plan, whether you're staying for now or thinking about going one day.

Right. Go and read the rest.

Just so you know...

I've been where you are.

Since I started talking about it, more women than I can count have messaged me. And the thing they say most, almost word for word, is this.

Why does this sound like my life? Did we all marry the same man?

You didn't. They've never met. None of them read a manual. And they still do the same things, in the same order, using the same words.

That isn't bad luck. It's a pattern. And if it's a pattern, it can be learned. Which means it can be spotted.

That's what this book is for.

Who this book is for

Maybe you're still with him. Things are hard, and you can't tell if it's a bad patch or something more.

Maybe people call it toxic, or high conflict, or say you just bring out the worst in each other. And that's never felt like the whole story.

Maybe you've left, and you still can't explain to anyone, including yourself, what actually happened.

Maybe you already know it was abuse, but you can't see how all the pieces fit together.

It's for all of you.

The title asks was it abuse, because that's the question most of us ask first. And a lot of this book talks about it like it's over, because for the women in it, it is. If you're still in it, read "was" as "is". Everything in here can be happening right now, in your house, this week.

I've tried to put as many different examples in here as I could, from lots of different women. You won't recognise all of them. Some will sound like nothing to do with you. Others will stop you in your tracks. Those are the ones to pay attention to.

Some of them will contradict each other. That's on purpose, because abuse doesn't look the same in every house. One man keeps his wife short of money. Another hands over his wages and checks every penny. One won't let her work. Another insists she works and takes what she earns. One shouts. One never raises his voice in his life.

They end up with the same thing. A woman who checks herself before she does anything at all.

Different threads. Same web. Same woman sat on the edge of the bath at midnight going over a conversation.

Why a spider's web

You'll see a spider's web all the way through this book, so let me tell you why.

When I first tried to explain what had happened to me, I couldn't. Every single thing he did sounded like nothing on

its own. And the more I tried to explain it, the more I sounded like I was making a fuss over nothing.

Then I thought about a web. You walk straight into one because you can't see it. And once you're in it, you can't say which bit is holding you, because it's all of it at once.

So in this book, the spider is him. The web is everything he built around you. The money, the rules, the friends, the phone, the comments, the bad days and the good ones. And you're the one who walked into it without ever seeing it was there.

Each chapter takes one thread and shows you how it works. Near the end, I'll put them all back together so you can see the whole thing at once.

What I want you to come away with is this. You didn't get caught because you were weak or stupid. You got caught because a web is made not to be seen, by something that knows exactly what it's doing. And once you can see the threads, you can start taking them down.

* * *

This isn't therapy. It isn't legal advice. And it isn't a report you have to get to the end of.

What I want is for you to feel seen. I want you to understand what was done to you and how. I want you to stop carrying the blame for it. And I want you to stop feeling guilty for not knowing at the time, because nobody ever taught you any of this, and you were never meant to spot it.

Then you can get on with your life.

Put it down when you need to. There's no prize for finishing it tonight.

You Weren't Stupid

Let's deal with that word first, because it's the one you use about yourself.

Stupid.

How did I not see it. I let it go on for years. I'm not a daft woman.

I've heard it from a nurse, a teacher, a solicitor, a woman who manages forty staff. All of them sat in front of me calling themselves stupid.

Clever, capable women. Women with degrees, women running businesses. The ones everybody else rings when something goes wrong.

And not one of them saw it coming.

* * *

Being clever was never going to save you, because this doesn't go after your intelligence.

You didn't sit down one day with all the facts in front of you and choose badly. Nobody does. It was done gradually, over

months and years, by someone who'd done it before, in a way that made every single step look reasonable at the time.

You can't be smart enough to spot something nobody ever told you existed.

* * *

Look at what actually got used.

You were kind. You gave people the benefit of the doubt. You didn't hold grudges. You believed that if you kept trying, it would get better, because that's what you'd do for anyone you loved.

You were loyal. You were forgiving. You kept your promises.

Every one of those is a good thing. It's why you're a decent mum and someone people want as a friend.

And every one of them was exactly what he needed.

For a lot of women it's independence. You're the woman who doesn't ask for help. You'll sort it yourself, thanks. Turns out that's a gap. If you never let anyone see you struggling, the first man who swoops in and handles something for you feels like a miracle.

He didn't find a weak woman. He found a good one and used the good bits.

You don't need to be embarrassed about what you're like. You should be furious about what was done with it.

* * *

Nobody taught you this. Not at school, not your mum, not anyone. You were told to watch out for a man who seems violent or controlling. No abuser seems like that at the start.

Half the professionals you might have turned to weren't

trained in it either. That isn't their fault. And it isn't yours.

So here's where we start. It wasn't your fault. Not the start, not the middle, not how long it went on, and not going back if you went back.

You won't believe that today. That's fine.

Just hold off on the verdict until you've read the rest. Once you've seen the whole thing laid out, it's very hard to still think the problem was you being stupid.

* * *

Here's something about spider silk.

A single thread of it looks like nothing.

But for its weight, it's stronger than steel. It's tougher than Kevlar, the stuff they make bulletproof vests out of. Scientists have spent years trying to copy it and they still can't get it right.

So if you're calling yourself stupid for not breaking free of a bit of thread, stop. You weren't held by something flimsy. You were held by one of the toughest materials there is, spun by someone who'd been doing it a long time.

But We Just Argued A Lot

One woman I know was seven months out when he told her she'd been abusive to him too.

And she told him she hadn't been. Their relationship was just toxic.

Toxic. Seven months out, and that was still her word for it. Even though she was the one who'd left. Even though she had years of messages on her phone.

You've been given loads of words for this and none of them quite fit. Toxic. High conflict. Narcissist. Emotional abuse. Coercive control. People use them like they mean the same thing. They don't. And using the wrong one is part of why you're still going round in circles.

So, quickly.

* * *

Toxic describes how it felt. You came out worse than you went in. But it's a feeling, not a description. And it's even. It sounds like two people making each other ill, both as bad as each other,

nobody's fault really.

That's why it's so comfortable. Notice what it lets everyone avoid saying, including you. Toxic doesn't need anyone to have done anything.

High conflict is the one that does the most damage, and you need to know why, because it might get said about you one day, especially if you end up anywhere near a family court.

High conflict is real. It's two people who can't get on. Both escalate. Both dig in. Both want to win. It's horrible for everyone, including the children, and both of them are doing it.

It isn't a milder version of abuse. It's a different thing.

From the outside, abuse can look exactly like that. A woman who's upset and angry and firing off messages. A man who's very calm. Two people who can't get on. Job done.

Except one is being controlled and the other is doing the controlling. And she's angry because of what he's doing.

That isn't high conflict. It's abuse that looks like it from the outside.

Narcissist is probably the word from social media that made you start looking, so it's done you a favour. But narcissistic personality disorder is a diagnosis. Neither of us can give it out. Say it about him in the wrong room and they'll pick you apart for using a word you're not qualified to use, and the patterns get ignored.

Narcissistic abuse is different. That describes behaviour, not a diagnosis, and you can use it.

But here's the bit that matters. What he is doesn't change what he did. You could get a psychiatrist's letter tomorrow saying he has it, and you'd still be exactly where you are. You could get one saying he hasn't, and every single thing in this book would still have happened. You've been trying to work out what he is.

The better question is what he did.

Emotional abuse is real and probably part of what you lived through. The trouble is it describes a type of harm, not the shape of what was going on. And it's come to mean "the kind without the hitting". That tells a woman who was hit that this isn't about her. And it tells a woman who wasn't hit that what happened to her matters less. Neither is true. Emotional and physical abuse often go hand in hand.

Physical abuse can be part of this, and often is. It's usually the last thing to arrive, not the first. That's why so many women can trace the control back years before the first time he put his hands on them.

Coercive control is the one that describes the whole thing.

A sociologist called Evan Stark named it. What he worked out was that this isn't a string of incidents. It's a system. One person setting up the conditions of another person's life until she isn't free inside it anymore.

It's not one thing he did. It's the arrangement.

In England and Wales it's been a crime since 2015. Since 2023 it covers ex-partners and couples who don't live together too, which matters if it got worse after you left.

Emotional abuse, physical abuse, sexual abuse, money, isolation. All of it can sit inside coercive control. That's the point of the term. It's the word for the whole web, not one thread.

* * *

So how do you tell?

Forget which word sounds right. Look at the power.

In a normal argument, even a nasty one, two people are doing the same thing. Both getting louder. Both being unfair. Both

want to win, and both are using the same tools to do it.

That wasn't your house.

You were explaining. Justifying. Apologising. Trying to be understood.

He was doing something else entirely. Twisting what you said. Bringing up something from three years ago. Walking out. Going silent for two days. Threatening. Reminding you what he could take away.

That's not two people arguing. That's two people doing completely different jobs.

An argument means both of you can lose it and be alright afterwards. You couldn't. You weren't allowed to.

That's the line. When control is how the argument gets won, it isn't conflict anymore. It's abuse.

* * *

Now, what you're about to say. He never touched me.

Maybe he didn't. It doesn't get him off anything. The law here doesn't need a single bruise. It needs a pattern of behaviour that had a serious effect on you. There's no minimum number of tactics. There's no requirement that he meant to do it.

And the other thing you're about to say. I gave as good as I got. I shouted too. I said things I'm not proud of.

Hold onto that. There's a whole chapter on it later. For now: fighting back doesn't make it a fair fight.

From here on I'm going to say abuse, and I mean coercive control, and I mean all of it. The money, the friends, the phone, the rules, the silence, and his hands if that happened to you too.

Not because a label fixes anything. Because you can't see the shape of something while you're still arguing about what to call

it.

Why You Couldn't See It

You've walked into a spider's web before.

Out the back door, down the side of the house, and suddenly it's on your face and you're doing that dance in the garden like an idiot.

You never saw it. Not because you weren't looking. Because you can't. A web is practically invisible until the light catches it at exactly the right angle, and then only for a second.

And you'd walked through that same spot the day before. There was nothing there.

* * *

A spider doesn't build in front of you. It builds while you're asleep, or at work, or in the other room. You come down in the morning and it's finished.

That's how yours went up. In bits, at times you had other things going on. When you were pregnant. When you were exhausted. When you'd just moved. When somebody died. When the baby wasn't sleeping and you had nothing left to notice

anything with.

He didn't do it when you had the energy to look.

* * *

Now pick up one thread on your finger.

It's nothing. You wouldn't notice it. One thread can't hold anything.

And that's exactly why you couldn't explain it to anyone. Including yourself. Because every time you tried, all you had was one thread.

He doesn't like my friend.

He does the money.

He gets funny if I'm late.

He read my messages.

Say any one of those out loud and it sounds like nothing. A man with his ways. Your mate says they're all a bit like that, and she means it kindly, and you go home feeling daft for mentioning it.

But nobody gets caught in one thread. You get caught in hundreds of them, all joined up, going in every direction, built over years.

That's the difference between a bad relationship and this. Not how bad any one thing was. How many threads there were, and how they hold each other up.

* * *

Here's the bit that made me sit up.

The spider doesn't get stuck.

It walks about on that web all day. It built it out of the stickiest stuff going and never once gets caught, because it knows which

threads are safe to stand on.

It made the rules. They don't apply to it.

Think about your house. The things you'd have been in trouble for that he did without a word. The tone you'd never have got away with. The night out he had that you'd have paid for all week.

You weren't imagining it. There were two sets of rules, and only one of you had to follow them.

* * *

So here's the answer to the question you've been asking since it ended.

You couldn't see it because it wasn't visible. You couldn't prove it because no single thread proves anything. You couldn't get out because it wasn't holding you in one place. It was holding you in about nine. And you couldn't spot it going up, because it went up slowly, in the bits of your life where you were already coping with something else.

None of that is a failure of intelligence. You weren't the problem. You just weren't stood where the light could show you.

Once you can see all the threads at once, it stops sounding like nothing. And that's when you'll get your answer to the question. Was it abuse? Or just another toxic relationship?

I Can't Cover All Of Them

In 2012, three researchers published something called the Checklist of Controlling Behaviors. They tested it on 2,135 women in America who'd been through it, and they counted what had been done to them.

They got to eighty four different behaviours. They sorted them into ten groups.

Physical abuse. Sexual abuse. Emotional abuse. Money. Isolation. Intimidation. Threats. Male privilege, which means treating you like staff: the decisions are his, the house is his. Minimising, where it didn't happen or wasn't that bad. And blaming, where everything that goes wrong is your fault.

Before you read that list, how many would you have called abuse?

Most women I ask say two. The hitting and the sex. The rest they'd have called him being difficult, or not getting on, or being too sensitive. Hardly anyone has heard of male privilege, and plenty of them lived in it for years.

Most of them lived with at least eight of them and couldn't have named one.

That's the point. You can't name a thing you don't know exists. If nobody tells you blaming is a category of abuse that researchers count, then it isn't abuse. It's just him. And you carry it as a fact about your relationship, instead of something that was done to you.

That's why women stay stuck. Not the tactics. The not knowing.

* * *

You don't need all of them. There's no score. Nobody's going to look at your life and say six counts and four doesn't.

And having a lot of them doesn't mean you were weak.

Think about what eighty four actually tells you. It's not a list of what he did. It's a list of every direction this can come at you from. Your money. Your friends. Your body. Your sleep. Your children. Your name in front of other people. The researchers got to eighty four before they stopped.

If a man used even ten of those, that's ten threads going in ten directions, all at once, for years. Picture that as a spider's web. Then ask yourself again why you couldn't get out, and see if the answer still sounds like you not trying hard enough.

* * *

I'm not going to cover all eighty four. You'd never finish it. I'm going into the ones I hear about over and over, the ones most likely to make you stop and go, oh.

But look at those ten headings again. There might be one you skimmed and then thought about twice. One that's already made your stomach go. If there is, that one's worth reading up

on yourself, because people have written whole books on each of them.

Nothing on that list is too small to count.

* * *

Here's what I want this book to do. I want it to be less confusing than it is right now. I want you to be able to look at what happened and call it what it was. A label won't fix anything. But you can't process something you haven't named, and you can't move on from something you're still trying to work out.

So from here, we go one thread at a time. Stick with it.

Name it. Understand it. Then leave it behind you.

When Did It Actually Start

Someone will ask you this. A solicitor, a friend, a woman with a form.

When did it start?

And you won't be able to answer, and you'll feel like a fraud.

Everybody struggles with this one. There's no first incident. No day it turned. Just a woman who was happy and then, somewhere in the middle, a woman who wasn't, with nothing in between to point at.

A lot of women tell people for years that he didn't change until after the wedding. Everything was fine and then it wasn't. No warning.

It usually isn't true. It gets said because it makes the shame easier to carry. There were signs. They just got turned into something else.

* * *

Look back at the very start and there's often one moment you can point to now.

Maybe it was a flat tyre. You'd come out of work, you didn't know how to change it, and he told you to go and wait somewhere warm because he was on his way. For a woman who never asked anyone for anything, that felt enormous.

Then tyres kept coming up. Where had you been driving? What had you done to them this time? You needed to be more careful.

The thing that made you feel looked after became the thing that made you feel small. Same man. Same tyre.

* * *

Here's what the start usually looks like.

It's fast. Together in weeks. Serious in months. Talking about the future before you've met each other's friends.

You're told what you are. His soulmate. His best friend. His dream girl. He's never felt like this about anyone. Nobody's ever understood him like you do. This doesn't happen twice.

Then living together happens early, for a sensible reason. His tenancy ended. Your rent was ridiculous. No point paying twice. Then something permanent arrives sooner than you'd have picked. A ring. A house. A baby.

You thought it was passion. Some of it might have been. But every one of those things makes leaving harder than it was the month before.

That wasn't romance building. It was a window closing.

* * *

Maybe he proposed straight after a row, instead of saying sorry. The apology never came. The ring came instead.

Maybe, before the wedding, you were already asking him to

stop calling you names. Already telling him you were anxious around him, because you never knew what would set him off. He turned it round, and you married him anyway, because by then it felt too late to do anything else.

* * *

And then there's the door. I know a woman who didn't tell a single person about this for years.

Before the wedding, he was always forgetting his key. She'd wait up while he was out until two, three, four in the morning, because if he couldn't get in it would be her fault.

One night she'd had enough. He messaged to say he was on his way. She turned every light off and went to bed. Let him sort himself out for once.

He banged on the door at four in the morning, shouting for the whole street to hear. She didn't go down.

He kicked it. Once. Twice. Three times. The whole door came off its hinges.

She lay upstairs in the dark, heart going, not moving.

He propped it back up and slept on the sofa. In the morning he fixed it, like doors just did that sometimes. Then he told her it was her fault, for not opening it, for playing games.

And she said sorry. She apologised for not letting him in.

* * *

There were other things too. You'll probably recognise some.

The exes. One was crazy. One was bitter. One made everything difficult over the children. One trapped him. One cheated. One won't leave him alone even now. Not one of them was a normal

woman it just didn't work out with. He told you that in the first month, and you heard bad luck. It was a list.

The testing. He'd be late and see what you did with it. Cancel and watch how you took it. Ask for something slightly unreasonable and see if you'd do it anyway.

He got jealous early, and it was framed as how much he cared. You were flattered.

The questions. Your ex, your family, your worst memory, what you're insecure about. You thought someone was finally interested. Every answer came back later, in a row, worded to hurt.

And someone said something. Your mum, your sister, your best mate, carefully, the way you do when you know you'll only get one go. I'm not sure about him. You defended him. She never said it again. Not because she stopped thinking it. Because she learned it cost her something. By the time you needed to say something back to her, the subject had been closed for four years.

His version, if you ever ask him, is that nothing started. You knew what you were getting. I haven't changed. And there's just enough truth in that to knock you off balance, because he was always him. What he leaves out is that you weren't shown him. You were shown a version, for as long as it took, and then it was slowly taken away once leaving got complicated. He was always the spider. You just met him while he was being Prince Charming.

His mates got the same treatment as the exes. That one's on drugs. That one's marriage is a joke. That one's wife doesn't earn anything. You thought he had high standards. He was arranging everyone in his life slightly below himself, and you were in his life.

He probably needed something too. Something he was struggling with that you could help with, because you're the sort of woman who helps. He wasn't picking women who wouldn't.

If you had children already, he was brilliant with them straight away. Took them places. Gave himself a name within about ten minutes. You thought, finally, someone who gets it.

And you told everyone how wonderful he was. Out loud. On Facebook. Maybe in a speech at your wedding. Now you have to live with having said it, and that embarrassment keeps a lot of women quiet for longer than anything he did. You weren't lying. You were describing the man you were being shown.

* * *

Most women, when pushed, name one of two things. The wedding or the pregnancy.

A lot of the women I know say the names started when they were pregnant. Sick, exhausted, needing help, and getting messages from the man who was meant to be looking after them that they'd never have believed if you'd shown them a year before. Then he'd be sweet the next day, and she'd put it down to the stress, his work, her hormones. It wasn't any of those. Pregnancy is one of the most common times for domestic abuse to start or get worse, because you need him more and you can't easily go.

That's not a coincidence. They're the two points where leaving stops being simple. A legal tie. A baby. A house. A name change. A family who've all turned up and bought a hat. He didn't necessarily wait for it on purpose. Something changes then, and what changes is he doesn't have to be careful anymore.

Think about the first time you were properly frightened. The

first shout, the first door, the first time you thought: what was that? That was never the start. By then he'd had a long run of smaller things you didn't argue with. The first scary one is just the first one loud enough to remember.

You couldn't have spotted it. The start isn't a badly hidden version of the end. It's a different thing, done well, by someone who's done it before. You're reading it now with the ending in your hand. You didn't have the ending. It's built to be unspottable, and the proof is that it works on clever, careful, well supported women all the time.

This chapter isn't here so you can go back through your past taking yourself apart. It's here so that if there's ever a next one, he gets weeks of your attention instead of years.

* * *

Before a spider builds anything, it has a wander. It tests things. Is this gap the right size? Will this corner hold? It puts a thread out and sees if it sticks. If it doesn't, it moves along.

None of it looks like anything. There's no web yet.

That was your first six months. He was finding out where your edges were, how much you'd put up with, how kind you were, how fast you forgave, how badly you wanted it to work, and who would notice.

He wasn't building anything yet. He was working out how.

He Was So Generous At The Start

He paid for everything at the start. Dinner, taxis, the weekend away neither of you could afford. You tried to split it once and he looked almost hurt. Put your card away.

For some women, it's that they only have to mention something once.

Say you love a particular bag, and he buys it. Say you like cheese, and he books a cheese and wine night. You laugh to your friend that you need to stop saying things, because every time you do, he goes and gets it.

It feels like a lot. More than you need. And something in your chest goes, oh, now I owe him.

You ignored it. Most of us did. You weren't being ungrateful. You'd picked up on something real. You just couldn't work out why something so kind didn't feel quite right. And you always try to see the good.

* * *

Generosity and control look exactly the same for about six

months. The difference doesn't show in what he gives you. It shows later, the first time you want something he didn't pick.

Somewhere early on, he probably told you about an ex who bled him dry. You filed it under poor him. It wasn't a story about her. It was the rules, told to you in advance.

It starts small. He covers you when your card's declined. He fills your tank. He takes over your phone bill because you'd moaned about it, and it's twenty quid, and who makes a fuss about twenty quid.

Then he borrows. Fifty quid, back Friday. It doesn't come back and you don't ask, because he paid for that whole weekend away and you'd look tight. Then it's three hundred. Then it's your overdraft. Then another bill. Then the car insurance. Then it's happening most of the time, and you couldn't tell me which month it started.

You never agreed to any deal. You just ended up on one side of a balance sheet you never saw anyone writing.

A lot of women find out the balance sheet exists in the middle of a row. Suddenly she's being reminded of everything he and his family have paid for and given up, and asked if she's forgotten.

The gifts had receipts. He'd kept them in his head.

* * *

Then the joint account. Sensible. Grown up. Money goes in.

And one day a chunk goes out on something neither of you discussed. A watch. A bike. A lads' weekend.

You say something, politely. And he says: I've never once questioned what you spend. You've had the bags. You've had the spa days. I want one thing.

And you're stood in your own kitchen wondering if you're the

controlling one.

You're not. He chose the bags. He booked the spa day. You said it was too much at the time and he did it anyway. Then he handed you the bill three years later.

That's the trick. He gave you things you never asked for, so he'd have credit to spend every time you objected to anything.

* * *

It never happens in one go. That's why you can't point at the day.

Joint account for the bills, because that's easier. Then his wages go in too, because he earns more. Then the mortgage is in his name, because your credit's worse. Then the baby. Then you go part time because nursery costs nearly what you earn.

When one woman I know went back to work, most of her wage went on nursery fees. In his head, nursery was her bill, because it was her job that needed covering. So he'd make out she didn't really earn anything.

In one row, he made out he'd earned more in a couple of hours than her business had made all year.

When we split everything up in mediation, that cash didn't exist.

Then one day you're moving forty quid out of an account with your own name on it, rehearsing what you'll say if he notices.

Nobody gave you the rules. You worked them out by getting them wrong.

* * *

Some of these will feel too small to mention. That's the point.

You checked the price before you checked if you liked it. The coat you needed stayed in the boot for three days, and it wasn't even expensive. You paid for the big shop on your own card so the joint account looked better. He set up your online banking as a favour and kept the login. He went through the bank app out loud, item by item, saying nothing. He asked how much your mum gave you for your birthday. He took you somewhere nice for tea the same week he said no to school shoes.

A bill went in your name because his credit was shot. Then two. Then the car finance. He cancelled your gym membership to save money. He started giving you a set amount every week and called it your money, like it was a present. You knew the exact amount above which you had to mention it, and nobody ever told you the number.

You asked for money for the kids and had to explain it twice. He always gave it you in the end, which is why you could never explain it to anyone. And all the while he had money you couldn't see, and you had to account for a big shop.

* * *

Sometimes you were allowed things. That's what confuses everyone.

He liked you looking well. It reflected on him. So you get your hair done and come home feeling like yourself for about forty minutes.

Then: a hundred and fifty quid? What the hell did you have done?

And it's gone. All of it, in one sentence. Next time it's due, you stand there working out whether you really need it.

He didn't ban anything. He just made it cost you something

on the way home.

By the end you were lying about the price of a jumper. You said it was cheaper than it was. You said it was a gift. You said you'd had it ages. Your sister buys you something lovely for Christmas and instead of being pleased you're working out what to say it cost, and whether to say it was second hand. Not because you'd done anything wrong. Because somewhere along the way, you stopped being allowed to want things.

You didn't tell anyone, because you knew how it would sound. A grown woman hiding a shopping bag. A man going through a receipt like he's doing an audit. You being asked to justify a coffee. That's what makes it work. Too small to prove and too odd to repeat. He carries on, nobody ever finds out, and you're the one doing the covering up.

* * *

Now, what you're already telling yourself.

He worked hard. He was knackered. He carried the mortgage. If I'd had his job I'd have been snappy about money too. We'd just had the baby. We overstretched on the house and that was both of us. And I'm no angel either. I nag. I can be arsey. I've said things sarcastically that I meant to sting. I booked something once without asking.

Right. Haven't we all.

I've been tired and skint and scared about money. So has every woman I know. Not one of us made another adult account for forty pounds.

Tired explains snapping. It doesn't explain a system. A bad week is a mood. Nine months of checking your balance in the bathroom with the door locked is an arrangement. And someone

has to keep it going, on the good days too.

You can be imperfect and still not deserve this. Both are true. Both are true of me.

* * *

If you earned well, you might think this chapter isn't yours. Stay with me.

Your wage goes into the joint account. His stays where it is, or there's a reason it can't be moved this month. Yours is ours. His is his. Your credit's good, so the loans go in your name. The car. The home improvements. The thing for his business. Good credit is an asset, and he used it. You pay for the holiday and he tells everyone about the holiday he took you on. And if you object: you earn more than me, what are you complaining about?

And nobody believes you, because you manage budgets at work. So you feel more stupid than if you'd had nothing.

You didn't have less money. You had less access, less say, and more to lose. And when it ended, he had the use of your salary to fight you with.

Earning well doesn't protect you. It just changes who believes you.

* * *

It was never about the money. It was about what money lets you do.

Without your own, you can't put down a deposit. You can't pay a solicitor. You can't get a taxi at two in the morning. You can't book a week somewhere cheap while you work out what to

do.

He didn't have to stop you leaving. He just had to make leaving cost more than you had.

A woman in one of my groups left with two children under four, no job and a pile of credit card debt. They spent months sharing one room at her mum's.

That's what it costs to go when the money was never yours. So if you stayed because you couldn't afford to leave, that wasn't weakness. That was maths. And you got it right.

* * *

One more, because it catches women out years later.

The bags, the coat, the holiday he insisted on. At the start that was love bombing, which isn't affection that got out of hand. It's a tactic with a job to do. Then it was the first thread of the money. And at the end it became evidence.

Because when you asked for what you were owed, he had a story ready. Look what I gave her. Look how she lived. She was never satisfied. He was building that story the whole time he was buying you things. And it plays beautifully to people who weren't there, because it comes with photos.

A lot of women spend ages trying to prove they're not a gold digger by asking for less than they're owed.

Don't.

* * *

You weren't bad with money. You were managing a person.

And there's a version of your life coming where you buy a coat, walk in the front door with it, and nothing happens. You hang it

up and forget about it. One woman told me the first time she did it, she stood in the hallway like she'd got away with something. Sounds like nothing. It's everything. You'll get that back.

* * *

The first threads a spider puts down aren't sticky. They're the frame. They go to the wall, the window, the corner of the ceiling, and nothing gets caught on them. They're there to hold the rest up.

That's what the generosity was. Not the trap. The thing the trap was tied to.

Damned If You Do

Work is one of the cleverest traps, because it's built so you lose whichever way you go. Whether you work or you don't, you'll be in the wrong.

* * *

Stay at home, it'll be better for the kids. That's how it's put, and it sounds reasonable. It might even be what you wanted.

What you don't find out for years is it was never about the kids. It was about him being the one who earns. The one who can say, in any row, that he pays for all of this.

And then you're told you don't bring an income. That he shouldn't have to feel bad for an hour of downtime. That you should sleep when the baby sleeps.

So you go back to work.

Now the hours are wrong. Now you're never available. Now you're always on your phone. Now your boss is too friendly, and why does he message you in the evening?

You'll spend a long time trying to find the version of yourself

that's right. There isn't one. That's the design. If working is wrong and not working is wrong, whatever you pick, you're in the wrong and he gets to be reasonable about it.

* * *

And if you keep the job, watch what happens to it.

The car keys go missing. He's forgotten he said he'd do nursery drop off. The row starts at eleven at night before your early meeting. You're ill and he's iller. Something happens on the one morning you can't be late.

Once is bad luck. Three times is a run of it. Nine months in, you're the one on a warning, and it's on your record, not his.

And when you say you might lose this job? He's furious. Because you're being careless with the money coming into this house.

The childcare is its own trick. He can't do Thursdays. He can't do school holidays. He can't finish early, ever, for anything. So you pay for wraparound and nursery and holiday club, out of your wage, because it's your job that needs covering.

Then you look at what's left of your salary and it's almost nothing. And someone says, maybe even him: you'd be better off not working.

* * *

If you work for yourself, it's quieter and it's worse.

One woman ran a weekend class. She asked him to have their daughter so she could teach it. He said he wasn't doing it every Saturday. He hadn't signed up for this, apparently.

His own daughter. On a Saturday morning.

Another built a little business with her sister. To him it was a hobby. Something to do with boxes. In rows, he'd mock how well it was doing.

Nobody stops you. He just makes the space you need to think in impossible to get into. Comments about the money you haven't made yet. Sighs about the time it takes. What did you actually do all day? Being funny about it in front of other people.

And working for yourself only runs if you believe in it every day. So you go quiet on it. You stop telling him about the wins. Then you stop having them. Then you tell people you wound it down because of the children. Some of that might even be true.

* * *

Now the other way round, because it happens just as often.

Sometimes he doesn't stop you earning. He lives off it.

You're the one with the salary. And instead of giving you any say in the house, you end up apologising for it. He tells you it makes him feel like less of a man. That you throw it in his face, which you've never done.

So you stop mentioning the promotion. You hand half the bonus over before anyone asks, to show willing.

You earned it and you're sorry about it.

* * *

The guilt trap is the last bit, and it's clever.

You ask him to help. He helps badly, or does it his way and makes things worse. You ask him to check with you first next time.

And he turns it round. Oh, so he's useless now. Fine, he won't

bother trying to help again.

Now you're the cruel one for asking. Next time, you just do it yourself.

* * *

You didn't lose your ambition. You were handed a set of conditions where succeeding cost you more than failing did. So you made the sensible call, over and over, until there was nothing left to decide.

That isn't giving up. Giving up is a decision. This was arranged around you.

* * *

A spider doesn't chase anything. It sits at the edge with one leg on a single thread, and it waits. The web catches the fly. It just has to feel it move.

He never had to stop you working. He only had to set things up so you stopped.

He Was Just Better At That Sort Of Thing

Think about the house you lived in together. The one you paid into. The one you cleaned.

Whose house was it?

You know straight away. His. Nobody ever said it and it was never in question.

His house. His car. His telly. His weekend. His tea.

Yours was whatever was left.

* * *

Here's how slowly this happens, and how normal every step looks.

Say you come into a bit of money and decide to buy a car. Something sensible. A family car.

He wants something flashier.

He doesn't argue. He sends pictures. Then more pictures. Then videos about why it's a smart buy, and why the car you wanted always comes out worse.

Every objection you have, he has an answer ready. Not angry. Just endless.

You don't know much about cars. He seems to. So you leave that bit to him, the way you do.

You buy the flashy car. With your money. The car you never wanted.

It turns out it's not much use with a baby. So you start driving his car instead, because it makes sense. Which means he's now driving the nice car you paid for.

And the car you're in keeps getting swapped. Each one worse than the last. Things that don't drive right. Things always about to need something doing.

So you stop trusting it. You think twice about a longer drive. More and more often you just stay in.

Nobody stops you going anywhere. You've got a car on the drive. You just can't rely on it.

Then one day he comes home and tells you he's sold the car you paid for and bought another one.

Not asked. Told.

Yours was in your name. The new one goes in his. When you say something, it isn't a row. You weren't there, it was a good price, he had to move quickly, and he'll sort the paperwork out. It isn't a big deal.

You say alright then.

The paperwork never gets sorted.

Your money went into a car you didn't choose, which you then didn't drive, which was sold without you and turned into a car in his name. There isn't one point in that where you could have told anyone something bad had just happened.

That's why you can't answer people when they ask why you didn't do something. There was never a moment to do

something about. Every step came with the explanation already attached, before you could ask a question.

* * *

The everyday version.

The thermostat is his. You're in a cardigan in your own living room.

The telly is his. Not because he said so. Nothing you'd pick goes on, so you stopped suggesting.

Tea is whatever he's taken out the freezer. And if you're making two meals because of the list of things he won't eat, you're not cooking, you're catering.

The weekend is his. He's booked a lads' weekend, or he's out Saturday, and you find out the same time as everyone else. Say anything and you're being controlling. You're trying to stop him seeing his mates. He doesn't tell you what to do, does he?

The freezer he bought without mentioning it. You didn't need one. It's in the garage now.

You can't have a lie in either, unless it's one he's decided you're both having. Want to get up early and have an hour with the house to yourself? Then you don't want to spend time with him.

* * *

Birthdays tell you a lot. The present that's really for him. The weekend away booked over your birthday, for him and his mates.

And sometimes, when he's away, the house goes calm. You can breathe. Without meaning to, he's given you a preview of life without him.

* * *

Time is where the two sets of rules stop being deniable.

Twenty minutes at the shop is fine. Fifty needs a reason. You've been rung for being five minutes past whatever time was in his head.

So you built in a buffer. You said an hour when you needed forty minutes. You left places early to be safe. You organised your whole day around never having to explain yourself.

And he could be three hours late and say nothing. It wouldn't occur to him that anything was needed. That isn't him being disorganised and you being uptight. There are two sets of rules in that house, and only one of you has to follow them.

You're not allowed to be ill either. You've got a temperature and his is worse. You're shattered and he's more shattered. You've had a horrible day at work, and wait till he tells you about his. You've done a twelve hour day and he worked through his lunch. After a while you stop mentioning anything. Not because he shouted. Because there's no point starting something you already know you'll lose. You never got to have your own bad day. Not once, in years.

* * *

Meanwhile it all falls on you.

The appointments, the forms, the school stuff, the vet, the insurance renewal, the birthdays, remembering his mum likes those particular biscuits. All of it in your head, all the time. Then he needs a form filling in. So you do his, and yours doesn't get done, again.

You come home from hospital with a newborn and the bags

are still where you left them. Days after a C-section, you're the one doing the school run.

He wasn't lazy exactly. None of it registered to him as work. It was just a thing that happened. Which is why he can't be thanked for it, can't be asked to take any of it, and why you've never once heard him offer.

And here's what takes years to see. He'd ask you to write his letters and draft his emails, because he wasn't good at that sort of thing. When anything legal came up, he didn't understand it. So you did it.

Then, once you've left, you watch him handle all of that perfectly well. The helplessness was as deliberate as everything else.

* * *

Now listen to how you talk.

He lets me. He doesn't mind if I. I'll have to check.

Check. With a grown man. About a Tuesday.

And the other way round. We decided to sell the car. We thought the new one made more sense.

We didn't. He did. You were told afterwards, and you've said we ever since, because saying he sounds disloyal. And because saying it out loud means admitting you didn't get a say.

If you want a quick test on the years you can't make sense of, listen to yourself describe them. The we that was only ever him. The permission you've been calling checking.

* * *

When a spider's finished with a web, it doesn't leave it hanging.

It eats it. Takes the whole thing back in, silk and all, and uses it to build the next one.

Nothing wasted.

You paid for a car you never wanted, and it ended up in his name.

That's what gets you in the end. Not that he took things off you. That everything of yours, your money, your time, your willingness to be reasonable, got spun straight back into the thing you were caught in.

But He Never Stopped Me Seeing Anyone

He never said you couldn't go.

That's the line you've been letting him off with for years, and it's true. He never stood in a doorway. Never took your keys. Ask him and he'd say he encouraged you to go out, and he'd mean it.

So how did you end up with nobody?

* * *

He didn't say no. He said fine.

Then he went quiet for two days. Or he was suddenly ill that night. Or there was a crisis at work. Or he started a row at six about something from last month, and by half seven you'd been crying and you weren't going anywhere looking like that.

Or he hit you, and the mark was somewhere you couldn't cover, and you weren't about to sit in a pub explaining it.

Or he asked who was going. Then who else. Then what time you'd be back. All of it friendly.

None of that is a no. It all works better than a no, because you

can argue with a no. You can't argue with a mood.

So you stopped putting yourself through it. You said no to things before he'd had to react. You told yourself it was easier. It was.

By the end he barely had to do anything, because you were doing it for him.

* * *

Here's one about steak.

One woman I know loved it. It was what she ordered every time they went out.

He had ideas, though. A lot of ideas. Most of them she'd learned to nod along to.

The one that mattered was that red meat causes cancer. So steak wasn't allowed in the house. It was never put to her as a rule. It was him worrying about her health. And it wasn't worth the row. So she stopped. She ate what he thought they should eat.

When her daughter was a baby, she went out for tea with a friend. To a steakhouse.

Her first steak in two years. And she felt guilty ordering it. He wasn't even there. She was keeping his rules for him in a building he'd never set foot in. Her friend said, just because he doesn't eat steak doesn't mean you can't. She was right. It still made her feel sick.

Then her phone started going.

Voice notes. One after another. Of the baby crying. Then messages telling her she was selfish, that the baby was unsettled and needed her, that a proper mum would be at home.

That baby had another parent in the house with her. A grown

man who could have settled her in ten minutes.

She didn't go home. She pushed back. She finished her meal.

When she got home, he'd left the key in the lock on the inside so she couldn't get in.

She stood on her own doorstep and couldn't get to her baby. She had to beg to be let into her own home.

He never said she couldn't go out. Not once. He'd tell you that himself. He didn't need to say it. She knew what happened now. And what she was frightened of wasn't him shouting. It was being locked out and not being able to get to her.

She never went out with a friend again after that. She just knew what it would cost.

And she didn't eat steak again for years.

* * *

Your friends go one at a time.

The loud one goes first. The one who says things. The one who'd have noticed. Suddenly there's a problem with her. She's single. She puts herself about. What sort of advice is she giving you? And underneath it, the thing he never quite says. If that's what she's like, what are you like when you're out with her?

Now you're defending your own character in a conversation that started about hers. He doesn't have to make you drop her. He just has to make her a subject that costs you something every time she comes up.

Then another one. He's fallen out with her fella, so it's awkward for everyone and easier if you all just leave it.

Then a message from her arrives while you're sat together, and he reads it over your shoulder and says something about the sort of woman she is. You think about it the whole time you're

typing back.

Another woman had old friends come to stay. Afterwards he decided her friend's partner had been secretly filming him. Laughing at him behind his back. It wasn't true. It didn't matter. They weren't welcome again.

Or there's the friend who started out as his friend. You get close. You can talk to her. Then one day he tells you she's said you're making her uncomfortable, talking about your relationship. You're mortified. You message her straight away to apologise.

She has no idea what you're on about. She never said anything of the sort.

She rings him and calls him out. He denies it, blocks her, and takes himself out of the group chat.

Some men use the family group chat the same way. Want to punish you? Take you out of it. One woman said the first thing she did when she left was take herself out. It thrilled her more than it should have.

* * *

And he'd offer to pay for you to go out. He'd suggest it, actually. Usually on a night he knew you couldn't, or for something you'd already turned down. That's not generosity. That's him building a record. Later he gets to say he always encouraged you to see your friends. And you'll back him up, because technically he did.

He also tells you what you'd get up to. A girls' night isn't a girls' night. It's an opportunity. You'll be flirting. You're dressed like that for someone. Your friend's only taking you out to pull, and you're the cover story. You've never done anything. But you've now spent four hours defending yourself to a man

who'd already decided, and next weekend, staying in is just easier.

Then there's the double dating, which looks like a social life for a while. His mate and his mate's girlfriend. Always the same four. You don't mind, because she's nice. Then he doesn't fancy it. He's tired. And you can't go to his friends' on your own, so that's gone too.

* * *

Family's a bigger job, so it's done slower.

It starts with respect. They didn't acknowledge him properly. They didn't thank him. Your mum said something at Christmas. Your sister has never once asked how he is.

He's not always rude. Sometimes he's worse than rude. He's upstairs when they arrive. He has to nip out. He sits there answering in three words, and everyone's relieved when it's over, and you're the one who has to make it alright.

Sometimes he'll say it outright. They're not welcome in his house.

And then, on the good days, to their faces, he's brilliant. Charming. Puts up a shelf. Your mum tells you how lucky you are. So every family occasion, you're lying. You're sat there while he's the best bloke in the room, saying nothing. You start dreading them. Not because of him. Because of who you have to be.

Then one day he says it, warmly. We're our own family now. It sounds lovely. What it does is turn the people who raised you into the old family. Optional. So every Sunday at your mum's isn't a plan anymore. It's you picking them over him and the children. He never has to stop you going. He's changed what

going means.

Some men make up rules about your family on the spot. One woman got a message at two in the morning with a new rule. Her mum wasn't welcome in the house unless she showed him what he decided was enough respect.

A new rule. In her house too. Decided at 2am.

She fought back. It worked anyway. Her mum felt unwelcome, and came less.

You start hoping he works late, because then your mum can come round without it being a thing.

You're measuring your luck by whether he works late.

* * *

You've arranged to ring your friend at eight. At seven he suggests you watch a film together, just the two of you, because you never do. So you ring her and he's quiet all night, or you cancel her.

You cancel her. Obviously you do.

And when he can see your phone, the chats stop being real. You can't tell her what's going on, so you give her small talk. The weather. Work. What you're having for tea. She can hear it. She knows she's getting small talk off someone who used to tell her everything, and after a while she doesn't know what to say to you either.

Then it gets worse and you talk to her even less, because now there's too much to explain, she'd never understand it anyway, and lying to her is exhausting.

You can't be honest and you can't stand lying to her, so you go quiet. That isn't the friendship ending. That's you running out of options.

* * *

The sister thing deserves its own bit, because it's cruel.

You finally say something. Not the worst thing. Just something, and it comes out small.

But he's already been there. He's mentioned the row himself, first, told as a normal row between two normal people. So your sister says what anyone would. Every couple goes through that.

And he hands it back to you. See? Even your sister thinks you're overreacting.

So now you've lost her too. Not because she failed you. Because he got there first and used her.

That's why you stopped telling people. It wasn't pride.

Some women I know just did less and less, because less meant fewer accusations. In the end it was the school run, the food shop and home again. One of them used to ask if it was alright to go and see her own mum.

And then there's the plan. Made weeks ago with your family, something to look forward to. The night before, something kicks off, bad enough that you can't face anyone. So you cancel, you make an excuse, and next time you don't bother making the plan.

* * *

Eventually the invitations stop. Your friends aren't being horrible. They asked you eleven times and you cancelled ten. Or they saw what it cost you afterwards and decided not to put you through it. They think they're being kind. To you, it looks exactly like being dropped. And your friend who stopped asking has probably decided you went off her, because that's the story

that makes sense from where she's stood.

And when you do push back on any of it, he doesn't argue about the thing. He goes for you. You're too loud. You show yourself up. You overdress and it makes people uncomfortable. You're too much, you've always been too much, everybody thinks it, he's just the only one who cares enough to tell you. Your friends don't actually like you, they put up with you.

And the one that's never said out loud, just left where you'll find it. Who else would have you?

That one does a different job. The rest cut you off from people. This one cuts you off from the idea that anyone out there would want you. Somebody kinder. Somebody who'd meet the loud and the too much and be fine with it. So leaving stops looking like a way out, because you've been told for years there's nothing on the other side.

By the last year you weren't really turning things down. You just didn't have it in you. You were managing him full time. Watching his face. Working out what kind of night it was going to be. There was nothing left over for a coffee with someone who'd ask how you were. You weren't antisocial. You were at work.

* * *

Here's the good news, and a lot of women don't believe it until it happens.

The friend he tried to take off you? Often she stays. One mum left and found that same friend right there, helping. Her children call her Auntie now. She remembers every nativity play.

Isolation only works while the relationship holds it in place. He didn't take your people. He just put them on hold.

* * *

A web catches flies from every direction. One comes in from the side and sees the whole thing lit up. One flies straight into the middle and never sees a thing.

And a web is built to catch one fly. On its own. Not a crowd of them.

Think about who you used to have around you. Your mum, who's been married thirty years and knows what normal looks like. The friend who's been through a nasty divorce and knows what the other kind looks like. The woman at work who reads everything. Your sister, who's never once been taken in by charm. Each of them had a different bit of life behind them, and each of them would have seen a different bit of the web. Put them in one room comparing notes and one of them would have been stood at the angle where it shows.

He didn't need to take everyone away from you. He just needed to make sure nobody was ever stood at the right angle at the right time.

I Offered Him My Phone And He Wouldn't Look

Start with the accusation, because the accusation pays for everything else.

A few weeks before her wedding, one woman I know was at a staff meeting after work. He messaged accusing her of lying about where she was. Then again. Then again. Later, it was that she wouldn't tell him who she'd been with, and that wasn't on.

She was at a staff meeting.

You're not cheating. You've never cheated. He says it when you're twenty minutes late, when you laugh at something on your phone, when you come out of the shower and your phone's face down. You're with this man almost every hour you're not at work. But once cheating's on the table, checking becomes reasonable. That's what the accusation is for. It isn't about another man. It's the reason he needs to be allowed to look.

* * *

Sometimes it starts off looking mutual. He hands you his phone

first. Go on, I've got nothing to hide. You don't even want it. But now it's a couple thing, and isn't it nice being with someone so open.

Other times it's less friendly. He asks for your phone and you say no, not for any reason, just because it's yours. And it turns into a whole thing. What's on there? If you've nothing to hide, why does it matter?

So you hand it over. You're already knackered.

It was never about whether you had anything to hide. It was about getting you to agree he's allowed to look. Once you've agreed, you don't get to un-agree.

Passcodes go the same way. He gives you his and asks for yours, or it's just assumed, because what kind of couple keeps secrets? A few months later he changes his. Work security, he says, or someone he doesn't trust. It sounds fine when he says it. You never get the new one. He's still got yours.

He might buy you a phone. A good one. More than you'd have spent. He sets it all up for you, transfers everything, logs you into everything. Lovely. He also knows every password on it, and he had it in his hands for two hours on his own.

* * *

Watch it grow, because it grows like everything else. Small, then bigger, then normal.

Location sharing, so he knows you got home safe.

Read receipts, because it's annoying not knowing.

Then: you read that twenty minutes ago. Why didn't you pick up?

Then: what time you home? Over and over, usually when you're out with your mum or your friends.

Then he can see you've been at your mum's for three hours.

Then a tracker on the car for the insurance. A smart speaker in the kitchen, which he swears isn't listening. Cameras outside, because of what happened down the road. A camera inside for the dog. A baby monitor, which is just sensible.

Every single one has a reason. A good one. Explained so calmly you end up wondering if you're the strange one for finding it strange.

* * *

Then it starts coming back to you in conversation.

What was in that Amazon parcel?

That was a long chat with the postman.

You left at twenty past, not half past.

You've been in the bath a while.

Nobody says I watched you. It just drops into a normal conversation and you're stood there working out how he knows.

Some of it isn't tech at all. He rings you at work about nothing, to check you picked up at your desk. He asks for access to your rota, because it's easier if you can both see the calendar. He turns up at your work do to pick you up, aren't you lucky, and sets what time you come home in front of your colleagues. He asks your mum how your day out was, where you went for lunch. Friendly as anything.

He's checking her version against yours.

So you start telling stories very carefully, in order, holding onto the details you'd normally forget. Not because you're lying. Because you know it'll be checked.

Then there's the camera you find. In a drawer. In a plug. On a shelf pointing at the wrong thing.

He's got an answer straight away. It's his ex's. It came with the house. It's not even plugged in. You've lived there eight months and never seen it.

And when you say out loud that you think he's been watching you, here's what comes back. I don't need a camera to catch you out.

Look at what that does. It doesn't deny anything. Now the question isn't whether he was watching you. It's what you've been doing that's got you so worried. Then: you're paranoid. Do you know how you sound? Have you thought about speaking to someone? It's called gaslighting, and we'll come to it. For now, notice that raising it made things worse for you. That's why you stopped raising it.

* * *

None of it stops at the bathroom door.

The lock gets broken and never fixed. Or you're asked not to use it, in case he needs the loo while you're in the shower.

If you've never lived like this you'll think that's about privacy. It's more than that. The bathroom was the one place you got ten minutes alone. It was where you rang your sister back. He took that and sounded completely reasonable about plumbing.

He comes in while you're in the bath and stands there, talking about nothing, not leaving.

He goes through your bag in front of you, right to the bottom, looking for his keys.

He scrolls your photos. Not looking for anything. Just scrolling.

He asks about something you said to someone four months ago.

He mentions what you've posted. He's taken an interest, he says. Then he asks you to word it differently, or take it down, because it doesn't make him look how he wants.

And here's what it turns you into.

You delete messages as you go. Not because you said anything wrong. Just in case. You couldn't even say what you're worried about, only that anything could be used later, and you'd rather not have to explain it.

You write texts twice in your head before you send them, even to your sister.

You try to hide your diary. If you leave it out, he reads it in front of you, like a magazine. That's what gets you. He didn't even think it was private.

* * *

A woman told me that the night before she left, he took her phone. He could feel something slipping and reached for the nearest thing he could control. She rang her mum on an old work phone, and the next morning, as soon as he'd gone to work, she packed the car.

* * *

I want to be straight about what all this adds up to, because it isn't jealousy.

A jealous man wants to know. This man doesn't.

That's why he wouldn't take the phone you held out. If he'd looked, he'd have found nothing, and then he'd have had to stop. He needs the question left open. As long as it's open, he gets to keep checking, and you keep behaving.

He isn't looking for a man. He's looking at you.

* * *

A spider's eyesight is next to useless. It doesn't watch the web.

Many of them run one thread from the web back to wherever they're hiding. A crack in the wall. Under a leaf. Then they sit there, out of sight, with one leg on that thread.

And it knows. How big you are. Where you are. How much you're moving.

It's not even in the room.

That's how he knew what time you left the house. Not because he was watching. Because he'd put something in place a long time ago that meant he didn't have to.

Nobody Ever Told Me The Rules

There were rules in your house. Loads of them. How things get put away. How the car gets parked. What gets said in front of his mother.

Nobody ever told you a single one.

You found them by breaking them. He never once said, this bothers me, can we not. He waited until you'd done it. Then you knew.

* * *

So you tried to be perfect.

Perfect wife. Perfect mum. Perfect house, because that's one less thing. Fridge stocked with everything he might fancy. Washing done. Nothing left out. Kids fed and calm before he walks in, and you told yourself you were just being organised.

It's exhausting. I don't think people understand how exhausting. Not the housework. Running a risk assessment on a kitchen.

And it doesn't work. Because the rules aren't there to be followed.

The kids have shoved their plates in the bin and the food's touching the lid, and that's the thing, he's off. You spend four hours on the house and he finds the one cupboard. The thing that was fine on Tuesday is a problem on Thursday, and you'll never work out why, because there isn't a why. If you could work it out you could avoid it. Then you'd be safe. And you were never meant to be safe.

A plate goes across the kitchen because the carrots are cut the wrong shape. He's never once in his life mentioned carrots.

* * *

It can be anything. Often it's food.

Say he puts tea in the slow cooker before he leaves for work and tells you it'll be ready at six. You're out all day with the children. That's fine, because the whole point of a slow cooker is you can leave it on while you're out.

Then the messages start at quarter to ten that night, and they go on for hours. Names. Your job. Everything you don't do.

Some women end up with a name for those nights. Bingo. Name calling, done. Belittling your work, done. Telling you you do nothing, done. Full house.

By the end you're shaking. Over a tea you didn't make and weren't asked about. Nobody ever mentioned a rule about the slow cooker. There wasn't one, until there was, and then you'd broken it.

And you apologise. Obviously.

* * *

Another woman said the sound of his work van pulling onto the drive did something to her whole body before she'd thought anything at all. What have I done today? What might he have a problem with? What do I need a reason for?

For nearly a year after she left, she couldn't pass a van like it without her stomach dropping. Not his van. Any van. On roads he'd never been on.

You'll have your version. The car door. The key in the lock. Whether he put his bag down or dropped it. His name lighting up your phone. A text arriving, before you'd even opened it. Your stomach went before your head had caught up.

You weren't being dramatic. Your body had learned something and it was telling you.

* * *

Then there were the things you had to tell him. A parking fine. Something broken. A letter about a bill you forgot.

There was never going to be a don't worry, we'll sort it. So you carried it round for two days first, working out how. Which room. What time. What mood. Before tea or after. Lead with sorry or lead with the solution so he had less to work with.

You planned telling your own husband about a parking fine like a hostage negotiation. And half the time you picked your moment and he still wasn't right, so you swallowed it and tried again tomorrow.

The other thing you stopped doing was saying how you felt. You'd learned two things. He's not going to hear it. And whatever you say will come back at you, turned round,

until you're the one apologising and the original thing has disappeared. It makes more problems than it solves.

That's how you stop sticking up for yourself. Not in one go. You try it a few times, it goes badly every time, and eventually you stop trying.

* * *

Here's the bit nobody outside understands.

When it's calm, you can't enjoy it. You're sat in a nice evening working out how long it'll last.

And when it's building, when he's going quiet and the answers are getting shorter, there's a thought you'd never say out loud.

You want it to go off. Just get it over with. The waiting is as bad as the row. Sometimes worse.

If you've ever wished he'd just start, nothing's wrong with you. That's what waiting does.

Which is why you can't relax even when he's in a brilliant mood. You're having a nice time with one eye on him, because it can turn over nothing, and you don't want to be caught enjoying yourself when it does.

And you moved the children. Upstairs, in the bath, bed an hour early, headphones on. Quickly and calmly so they didn't clock why. Hold onto that. Later on we'll talk about what they saw anyway, and I don't want you thinking you did nothing.

* * *

Some nights it was silence. One word answers. Blanking you. Looking straight through you. Refusing to answer a direct question, like a child would.

You said no to sex and he took himself off to another bed. He usually waits and has tea with you, and tonight he gets a takeaway and eats it on his own, so you'll notice. Days of it, sometimes.

You can't ring your mum and say he's been quiet. There's nothing to describe. That's what makes silence such a good weapon.

Shouting, or silence, or for some of you, his hands. And you never knew which. Three different reactions to the same thing means you can't plan for any of them.

* * *

However it went, you were the one who ended it. You apologised. Sometimes you knew what for and said it anyway, because you wanted your house back. Sometimes you didn't even know what for. It worked, and that's the bit that shames you now.

It shouldn't. You were buying peace with the only currency he'd take.

One woman apologised for hiding a bill, and he told her he was still waiting for a proper apology.

And then, afterwards, it's lovely.

The morning after, the message comes. He's sorry about last night. He wants to take you out. It won't happen again.

Another has a row saved where he went from swearing at her for apologising to begging her to accept his apology.

In less than an hour.

And you get a fortnight of the man you met. Funny. Bringing things home. Talking about the future. He's properly sorry, sometimes crying, and you've never seen him cry. He's going to get help. He's going to stop drinking. He's going to talk to

someone. It'll never happen again, and you can see he means it.

None of it happens. By the third or fourth time you knew it was words while he was saying them. You let yourself have it anyway, because you were so tired.

That isn't you being stupid. That's you being handed exactly enough to keep going.

* * *

If there's drink in this, or drugs, we need to talk about it.

For a lot of women it's the whole explanation. He's fine until he's had a few. It's the drink. It's the coke.

A woman in one of my groups said it to us not long ago. He's not a bad man, she said, and she knew she sounded stupid saying it. It was the drink and the drugs. Nobody in that group thought she was stupid. Every one of us had said the same sentence about our own.

And that belief does a lot of work for him. If the problem is a substance, it's fixable. He can stop. If he can stop, you can stay, and all of this was temporary. So you wait. Sometimes for years.

In a lot of houses it starts with a four pack after work. You see the cans and your stomach goes, because you know it won't stop there. Then a trip to the shop. A bottle of wine. Back to the shop.

The drink does make it worse. You can't predict a man who's sober on Tuesday and someone else on Friday. It doubles everything in this chapter, because now you're reading the mood and counting the cans. It costs money you haven't got. It wrecks sleep. An evening can turn at half nine for no reason.

It makes the good days better too, which is its own trap. He's ashamed. He'll get help this time. The apology's bigger because the incident was bigger.

But here's what settles it.

He doesn't get drunk and go for his boss. He doesn't put his fist through a wall at his mum's. He does it to you. In his own house. Where nobody's watching.

Drink doesn't tell a man who to aim at. It doesn't put a bill in your name or work out which friend to get rid of first. It lowers what's already in him and gives him something to blame in the morning.

If a man who drinks is abusive, and he stops drinking, you get a sober man who's abusive. Plenty of women have waited through rehab to find that out.

None of that means the addiction isn't real, or that he doesn't need help with it. But his drinking is his to fix. What he does to you is a separate problem. Neither was ever your job.

* * *

Somewhere in all that, you went.

You stopped making decisions. Even small ones. You asked what he wanted for tea. You asked his opinion on things you didn't need an opinion on, because asking was easier than choosing and finding out you'd chosen wrong. Every choice went through one question. Not what do I want. What causes the least trouble.

Do that for a few years and you're a puppet. Saying what you think he wants to hear. Getting ahead of things he hasn't even asked for yet. And you don't notice, until someone who's known you forever says something and you can't answer.

Underneath it all was one belief. It's my fault. If I'd been calmer. If I hadn't mentioned it. If I'd done the bin.

Blaming is one of those ten groups the researchers counted. It

isn't a side effect. It's part of it. It's the bit that gets you policing yourself so he doesn't have to.

You weren't walking on eggshells because you're an anxious person. You were walking on eggshells because someone kept putting them down.

And you're probably still doing bits of it. Still bracing at a car door. Still rehearsing before you say something to someone who'd never react like that in a million years. That's not who you are. It's what you learned. And what you learn can be unlearned.

* * *

A web isn't rigid. It's built to move. Something hits it, the whole thing stretches, and the spider comes straight out to repair it. A web that's been pulled about and not fixed will fail.

That's what the apology is. That's the fortnight of him being lovely.

You pushed back, or cried, or nearly told your sister, and the web stretched. So he fixed it. A bit more sorry than last time, because last time's sorry wouldn't hold you now. A bigger promise, because the small ones were used up.

And on the odd time you pushed so hard a thread actually snapped, when you left for a weekend or told someone, he didn't rebuild it the same. He came back different. Softer. Or through the children. Or through money.

Same web. Same spider. New thread, in a different direction, while you were still getting your breath back.

It Was Never A Big Deal

Nothing in this chapter is big. That's why it's here.

The comments. The corrections. The bits about how you look. The jokes at the table that everyone laughed at. Not one of them worth ringing anyone about.

One thing runs through all of it. He never tells you the real reason. Whatever he says it's about, it's about something else, and you only see the something else afterwards.

* * *

One woman I know had been trying for a baby for six months. Three of her close friends announced they were pregnant in that time. She smiled for every one of them with her heart breaking.

So she asked him, gently. Do you think we should look into it? Could there be a problem?

He didn't miss a beat. It wasn't him. He already had children. If there was a problem, it would be her.

Said like a simple fact. Not a big deal.

She fell pregnant naturally, not long after. She's never

forgotten that sentence.

* * *

Here's how it goes when women raise things.

One said he was on his phone instead of playing with their daughter. He asked if she was on her period.

Another told him the nursery hadn't been giving their child the allergy medicine she needed. He suggested, ever so gently, that she might be overreacting. With a kiss on the end.

That's the gentle version. The kisses make it hard to object to. But look at what it is. A child's medicine, and a mum being told she's overreacting.

* * *

The makeup is the friendliest one. You don't need all that. You're prettier without it.

You took it as a compliment. Why wouldn't you?

Then it moved. Why have you got all that on? Where are you going? Who's going to be there?

So you stopped. You told yourself you couldn't be bothered anymore. What actually happened is you were made to look less like yourself, and you felt worse about your face, and both of those suited him.

Then clothes. That's a bit much for a Tuesday. That's too tight. You look like you're after something. So you covered up. Not because he banned anything. Because being looked at had started to cost you a row in the car.

A woman in one of my groups kept the voice notes he sent her when she was out. Not asking if she was having a nice time.

Telling her what she looked like in what she'd gone out in.

I need to say something uncomfortable here, and if it isn't you, skip it. For some women the covering up comes first and the bruises come after. Long sleeves. High necks. He was keen on them. You thought he'd finally taken an interest in your clothes.

He had. Just not in the clothes.

* * *

Some men do it the other way, and plenty do both, depending on the night. He picks the dress. He likes you being looked at, as long as it was his idea. He wants you done up, because then you're something he brought with him. Then you get there and it starts. Your skirt's too short. Everyone's staring. Do you have to stand like that?

He chose it. He was pleased about it two hours ago. And now you're pulling a dress down in a bar at nine o'clock.

Both halves of that night did the same job. You got to be his and uncomfortable at the same time.

The hair is fine for years until you get it done without mentioning it. Then: I've never liked it short. I've never liked blonde. It doesn't suit you. Who's it for? Is it for work? Is it for that Simon in your phone, the one who likes blondes? You went for a haircut on Saturday morning and by teatime you're defending your own head.

The body comments go both ways. You've put weight on. You're too skinny. You've got a body like a child. You've got shoulders like a bloke. Have you seen the size of that portion? And when you react, I'm only joking.

Or the worse one, dressed up as kind. I don't mind it. I still fancy you. Most men wouldn't.

He's just put you down and made it sound like a favour.

Some of it isn't even aimed at you. He's showing you a woman on his phone. Saying something about someone on the telly. Talking about his ex's body, loud enough, in a room you're stood in. Nothing's said about you. Nothing has to be. You just start quietly reshaping yourself into whatever that was. The hair, the gym, the nails. And you'll swear it was your own idea. You were doing it to keep the peace. You just didn't know that's what it was called.

* * *

Then the jokes in front of people.

She's not very observant, are you love?

Don't ask her, she'll get it wrong.

Bit of a dumb blonde, this one.

The whole table laughs. You laugh too, because what else do you do at a table?

In the car you say you didn't like it. It was a joke. You're so sensitive. Everyone else thought it was funny. Why do you have to make everything a big deal?

And that hits home, because everyone did laugh. So it must be you. You can't take a joke. You've got no sense of humour. You've gone very serious lately. They laughed because they were at a table with a man being funny. They weren't thinking about you. That's not a verdict on whether it was alright.

And the story you asked him not to tell. You asked properly. He said he wouldn't. Then he told it at someone's birthday meal and watched to see what you'd do. That isn't forgetting. You gave him a clear line and he stepped over it in front of an audience.

You did nothing. And now he knows what your line is worth.

* * *

The corrections are smaller again and do more damage than any of it.

You're telling a story and he corrects you. Tuesday, not Wednesday. Thirty five quid, not forty. Her cousin, not her sister. Never about anything that matters. Or he just takes the story off you and tells it himself, better, while you sit there with your mouth half open.

So you stop telling stories. After a few years you're the quiet one. And you used to be anything but.

And there's one that messes with your head. How different he is depending on who's watching.

Some men are lovely to you in front of people and go cold the second the door shuts. You spend the drive home working out what you did between the pub and the car.

Others are sharp with you in company and sweet as anything when you're alone. So the people who love you have seen it, and you've told them it's fine.

Both leave you in the same place. Knowing nobody else will ever see the version of him you live with.

* * *

Here's where all the small things end up.

You buy clothes that won't start anything. You do your hair so it won't get mentioned. You pick a story you know is safe. You test a joke in your head before you say it.

So ask yourself. What do you actually like wearing?

A lot of women can't answer that for a while. It got trained out of them, one comment at a time, and not one of those comments

was worth mentioning to anyone.

* * *

When a spider lays the sticky part of the web, it doesn't use a ruler. It uses its own leg. Puts it across the gap, and that tells it where the next thread goes. Round and round.

So every gap is the same. Every gap is just small enough.

Look at one gap on its own and it's nothing. There's nothing there.

The trap isn't the threads. It's the spacing.

Any single comment about your hair, your dress, your weight, your memory, is a gap. He wasn't doing any of them for their own sake. He was measuring how much room to leave you.

Am I Going Mad?

This is the one that follows you out.

You can get away from the money and the phone and the rules. But years later you'll still be the first person in any room to say, maybe I've got it wrong.

Plenty of women still do it years later. I'm terrible for forgetting things, they'll say. They're not, particularly. It's just the quickest way to end a disagreement, and they learned that somewhere.

And here's something else. A lot of women, years out, still have days where they ask themselves if it was actually abuse. If it was as bad as they remember.

With the messages still saved on their phone. After telling their story out loud.

That's what this does.

* * *

It starts small. He says something. You hear him say it. An hour later he never said that.

Not awkward. Not caught out. Calm. A bit puzzled. A bit concerned about you.

Or he admits he said it, but it meant something else entirely, and his version is always the one where he was reasonable and you overreacted.

That's got a name. Gaslighting.

It comes from an old film, where a husband keeps turning the gas lamps down in the house, and when his wife says the lights are getting dimmer, he tells her she's imagining it. He keeps it up until she thinks she's losing her mind.

That's what it is. Not lying about one thing. Getting you to stop trusting what you saw, heard and remembered, until his version is the only one left.

Then comes the move that does the most damage. See, you always do this. I say one thing and you turn it into something else.

Now you're not arguing about what he said. You're defending your whole character. And the thing he said has gone. You'll never get back to it.

The tone thing is its own trick. Don't raise your voice at me. When you hadn't. Don't use that tone with me. When you'd asked a normal question. You were shouting. You weren't. Or you are now, because you've spent ten minutes being told you're shouting.

He tells you what you feel, too. You're being aggressive. You're angry. You're not. You're upset. And now you're arguing about your own feelings instead of the thing you came in about.

* * *

Remember the slow cooker?

Forget the row. Look at one sentence. You were meant to turn it off.

He knew you weren't home. That's why it was in a slow cooker. But he says you'd talked about it, and you'd said you would.

And you stand in your kitchen trying to work out if you had.

You know you couldn't have. There's no version of you that agrees to turn off a slow cooker at four when you know you'll be nowhere near the house at four.

But he's so certain. And you're so tired. And by then you've been getting things wrong for a long time, or you've been told you have, which has started to amount to the same thing.

So you think, maybe I did say it. Maybe I mixed it up. Maybe I wasn't listening properly.

That's the fog. Not that you believe him. That you can't find solid ground either way, about a slow cooker, in your own kitchen.

* * *

Try something. Search your messages for I didn't say that. Then I never said that. Then twisting my words.

One woman has a message where he told her she was twisting his words, and that he'd never said she was a burden. After a row where he'd said exactly that kind of thing.

Look at who's doing what in those threads. You're explaining. Going over it again. Apologising for how it came across. And him: no you didn't, that's not what was said, you're twisting it.

For years. In writing.

And he knew what not to put in writing. Some of it only ever happened on the phone, or in the kitchen. When you brought it up: prove it. Show me where I said that.

You can't. But you know, because you cooked for two that night, and you wouldn't have. Your own actions are the evidence. Just not the kind you can show anyone.

* * *

So you start collecting. Screenshots. Notes with dates on. Some women record conversations so they can check later what was actually said.

And you feel horrible doing it. Sneaky. Like you're the one behaving badly in your own relationship.

You weren't being sneaky. You were trying to hold onto something solid, because someone had taken it off you.

* * *

And here's what nobody tells you. By then your head isn't at its best.

You've been on alert for years. You're carrying the whole house in your head. You're not sleeping. If there's a baby, you're bone tired in a way you can't explain.

So you are forgetting things. That bit's true.

Which makes it almost impossible to tell the difference between I forgot and it didn't happen. He didn't have to work very hard by then. The conditions were there, and he'd helped build them.

Then every real mistake goes in the file. You forget something, the way people do, and it gets filed. Brought out weeks later. Well, you forgot the appointment, didn't you. You lied about the parking ticket. So we both know what you're like. One parking ticket three years ago, and now you're someone who can't be

trusted with facts.

Your keys aren't where you left them. Your charger's gone. And when you say something: you're always losing things. That goes in the file too. And next time something bigger is in dispute, there it is. You lose things. You forget things. You get confused.

* * *

Then he brings in other people, and you can't check any of it.

You made my mum uncomfortable at Christmas.

Your sister's said something to me about you.

People have noticed you've changed.

You're always playing the victim, and everyone can see it.

Unless you're going to ring his mum and ask, that just sits there. So you decide you're too much. You go quieter around everyone. You stop mentioning your relationship to anybody, because you don't want to make things awkward for them. It isolates you, and it makes it your idea.

* * *

After a few years, you'll believe things you'd never believe from anyone else.

One woman believed his boss had gone on a two month sabbatical, and that's why he couldn't take a single day off to help with the children.

Another believed they couldn't talk about something because two of his best friends and his cousin had all died in the same week.

Say those out loud now and they're ridiculous. At the time they didn't blink. He'd been in charge of what was real for so

long that they'd stopped checking with themselves first.

The stories change shape too. He starts with something that did happen. Each time he tells it, it grows. One extra detail. Then another. By the fifth telling it's a different event, and you can't point to the true bit anymore, because you've heard the new version more times than you lived the old one. That's how your own life ends up described back to you in a way you don't recognise.

* * *

The one that goes deepest is when he tells you what's wrong with you. You've got a memory problem. You're depressed. You've not been right since the baby. Then, kindly, you should see someone. Maybe the doctor.

The trap closes either way. Go, and it's proof. She's under the doctor. She's on medication. She can't remember things properly, it's documented. Everything she's ever said about him has an explanation now. Don't go, and he gets to keep saying you're struggling and need help.

Living like this can make you unwell. Anxiety, low mood, not sleeping, panic. They're real, and they're what happens to anyone braced for years. If you've got a diagnosis, it's not invented. If you take something, that's yours, and it's nobody's business.

I'm not saying nothing was wrong. I'm saying what was wrong got used against you. Something real, that he helped cause, handed back to you as the reason none of your account could be trusted.

* * *

One woman told me that near the end, in the middle of a row, he called her a narcissist.

She didn't know exactly what it meant. So later, when the house was quiet, she looked it up.

And her world fell apart. Because it wasn't her he'd described. It was him. Every trait. The love bombing. Making himself the victim in every story. The apologies that never came.

After they split, he told her she'd gaslit him and lied to him every day.

That's how it works. They take what's true about them and hand it to you.

* * *

So this is where it leaves you. You can't trust your memory. You can't trust your read on a situation. You check things you don't need to check. You save things just in case. You apologise before you know if you've done anything. And when someone finally asks what happened, you can't give them a clean account.

That isn't because you're unreliable. You're a completely reliable witness to something built to stop you describing it.

* * *

The web isn't just thread. Along the spiral there are tiny beads of glue, spaced out, too fine to see.

One leg touches. You pull. Pulling brings another part of you into contact, so now two bits are stuck. So you pull harder, and that's three.

Struggling is what catches you. The web doesn't have to do anything.

Every message explaining yourself. Every conversation you replayed. Every time you tried to pin down what was actually said.

You weren't stuck because you gave up. You were stuck because you kept trying.

He's Never Hit Me

This is the sentence that keeps more women away from help than any other.

He's never hit me. So it can't be that.

So many women say it. He never laid a hand on them. So for years they tell themselves it doesn't count.

Nobody tells you that violence is also a door kicked off its hinges at four in the morning. A plate smashed across the kitchen. Something of yours kicked across the room.

Violence in a relationship isn't only what's done to your body. It includes threats. It includes damage to things. Punching a wall is violence. It just wasn't aimed at your face, and it didn't need to be, because you got the message anyway.

Which was the point.

A fist into the wall, close to where you were stood but not at you. Things kicked. Things thrown. Things broken that you then had to explain to someone, or replace, or clear up off the floor while he was upstairs.

And when he tells the story later, nothing happened. He never touched you. He'd say it in front of anyone, confidently, because

in his head it's true.

You can be terrified of a man who's never laid a finger on you. Most of the women I speak to are.

* * *

Then there's what he does with his body without doing anything.

Standing too close. Close enough that you can't move, and nothing's been said that anyone could repeat.

Standing in the doorway. Not touching you. You're just not getting past, and you both know it.

The jaw going. The fists. The shoulders up. You can watch it build across a room and nobody else in that room sees a thing.

The hand that comes towards your face fast and stops. The lunge that isn't a lunge. Squaring up and then laughing.

And straight after: I'd never hit a woman. Said as reassurance. Heard as a reminder that it had been an option.

One mum left the second time after he got right up in her face, threatening to kick her out and take her daughter. She waited until he went to work and ran to her mum's.

* * *

The threats don't have to be about his hands.

That you'll be out of this house. That it's his name on it. That you'd have nowhere to go and no money to go with.

Another was told, mid row, that if she went to her mum's he'd change the locks. And that the baby could stay with him.

That he'll take the children. That no court would give them to you. That he'll tell them things about you.

That he'll show people the photos you let him take, the way

people do in a relationship. That he'll tell your parents the thing you never wanted them to know. Tell your work. Tell everybody. Put it online and let people make their own minds up.

A lot of women never talk about that last one, because by then they're not just frightened of him. They're frightened of what he's holding.

And the one that works on your kindness instead of your fear. If you leave, he'll hurt himself. He might have shown you something to prove he means it. You're the only one who's ever understood him. That's one of the most effective things a man can say to a woman like you, because you're kind, and some part of you now believes you're responsible for whether he's alright.

You are not the only thing standing between him and anything. You're not qualified to be, it was never your job, and it isn't a reason to stay in a house you're frightened in. If you're worried about him, there are services whose job it is, and he can be given their number like anyone else.

A woman told me recently that he'd made her feel it was her responsibility to fix him. When someone in the group said it isn't our job to fix these men, she said nobody had ever said that to her before.

* * *

Some men talk about killing you.

As a fantasy about how easy it would be. As a claim he'd make it look like an accident, or like you'd done it yourself, or like he had no choice. Sometimes he says it about his ex instead, which tells you the same thing.

If that's been said to you, even once, even laughing, it isn't

dark humour, and it isn't him being dramatic.

Go back to the numbers at the front of this book. Today. Not when you've finished reading.

* * *

Some of it is information. Stories about fights he's had. Who he's knocked out. That he only needs one punch. That his mates are wary of him. That he's been in trouble for this sort of thing before and he'd do it again. That people in this town know not to start with him. Not threats. Just things you can't unhear.

Some of it is objects. Talking about how sharp a knife is while you're stood there. How handy he is with a chainsaw. How he knows his way round an axe. A baton by the bed, or something under the stairs, for protection, he says. Never used. Just there, and you know where.

Some of it is driving. Too fast when the mood's wrong. You ask him to slow down and he goes faster. With your children in the back. Showing you how much of your life is in his hands.

Nobody got hit. There's nothing to report. You got home.

And a lot of it comes as a joke. What he'd do if he ever caught you with someone, said with a grin. You laugh, and something in your chest doesn't. You can't repeat a joke to your sister. Out of his mouth it was one thing. Out of yours, in her kitchen, it's nothing.

Some of it comes when you're at your weakest. A woman I spoke to was seriously poorly, and the day after, he made a joke about what he'd have done if he'd been the one making decisions about her care. Everyone's supposed to laugh. She didn't.

That's what the joke is for. It gets the threat delivered and leaves you with nothing to hold.

And through most of it, he's calm. That's what makes you doubt yourself most, because you expected abuse to be red faced and shouting. He's level. Reasonable. Sometimes almost bored. Frightening someone calmly takes more practice, not less.

So you never said anything. By then you'd lost most of your friends and been told for years that you overreact. What were you going to ring anyone about? He punched a wall. He drove fast. He said something about a knife, but he was only talking about the knife. None of it fits in a sentence. That's not an accident either.

* * *

There's one more I need to talk about. I'll keep it gentle, because for some of you this will be the hardest part of the whole book.

Sex.

A lot of women never call what happened to them sexual abuse, because it didn't look like the thing they'd been warned about. There was no stranger. It was the man they shared a bed with.

But it can look like this. Saying yes because saying no wasn't worth the next three days. Him sulking, or going cold, until you gave in. Being told it's what couples do, that something's wrong with you, that if you won't, someone else will. Being woken up to it. Being pushed into things you'd said you didn't want, until saying no started to feel like the unreasonable thing. Him deciding when you'd try for a baby, or making it hard for you to stop one. Having sex to keep the peace, so the night stayed calm and the children didn't hear a row.

Going along with it doesn't mean you wanted it. A yes you give because you're frightened of what happens if you say no isn't really a yes. That's true in a marriage too. Being with him

doesn't mean he's owed anything.

You don't have to put a name on it today. But if something in that list made your stomach drop, it counts. If you want to talk to someone about it, even years later, the helplines at the front of this book will listen. So will Rape Crisis on 0808 500 2222 in the UK, and RAINN on 1-800-656-4673 in the US.

* * *

If it did become physical for you, it almost never started there. It built.

Your arm gripped too hard and let go before it marked. Play fighting that stopped being play. And underneath it all, the thing you both know without saying it. He's stronger than you, and you can't stop him if he decides not to stop.

By the first proper time, everything else in this chapter had usually been going on for years. That's why so many women can date the fear back long before the bruise.

If that's you, nothing in this book is less yours. It's more.

* * *

Now the reason you stayed.

You worked out that leaving looked more dangerous than staying. You were right.

The Femicide Census counts the women killed by men in the UK. In 2017, just over a third of the women killed by a partner or ex had separated or were in the process of separating. More than half of those were killed within the first month. Nearly nine in ten within the first year.

You weren't weak. You weren't in denial. You'd read a

dangerous man correctly, with better information than anyone who ever asked why you didn't just go.

Leaving is the most dangerous part. If you're still there, or newly out: plan it, don't announce it. The people at the front of this book are better at this than I am. That's a fact, not a feeling. Anyone who ever made you feel stupid for staying didn't know it.

* * *

And here's where it's left you.

Someone raises their voice in a shop and your whole body goes. A friend reaches past you for something and you flinch, then laugh it off. Someone stands too close in a queue and you have to move. You dream about the children being taken, and you wake up and have to check.

That's not you being fragile. That's a body that spent years reading a dangerous situation correctly and hasn't been told it's over yet. It does calm down.

* * *

Notice how often one of these props up another. Hold onto that. Near the end, I'll put them all together properly.

But I Started It Too

This is the chapter you've been dreading. If you're like most women, you skipped ahead to it.

Because there's a thing you did. Maybe more than one. You've never said it out loud, and you've read everything so far thinking, yes, but she doesn't know what I'm like.

So let's get it out of the way. Some of what you did wasn't okay. I'm not going to pretend it was. You'd know I was lying and you'd stop trusting the rest of this book.

This chapter is for understanding why it happened. Because until you understand it, he gets to keep it and use it on you forever.

* * *

Start with the screaming.

You screamed at him. Properly screamed, in a way you've never done at anyone, before or since. Face hot, heart going, hands shaking, something in your chest that had gone past you being in charge of it.

And you frightened yourself. Who is this? It didn't feel like you.

So when he says later, calmly, that you were out of control, you remember that, and you think, well. I was, wasn't I.

That one memory does more work for him than anything else he owns.

* * *

Here's one woman's story.

She was raised on words, not hands. Nobody play fought in her house. If you had a feeling, you said it. She didn't even swear. That's who she is.

She was pregnant. He asked her to have his two children for the afternoon because he had a job interview. Of course she said yes. They were his children and she loved them.

She made tea. She kept them busy. Hours went by. She rang him. No answer. Rang again. Texted. Nothing. The children kept asking where their dad was and she had nothing to tell them. In the end she had to get hold of their mum so she'd know what was happening, because she didn't know if he was coming back.

Then she went looking.

He was in the pub. Drink in hand, laughing with his mates. No interview. He looked up at her like he couldn't work out what her problem was. The interview had been hard, apparently. He needed a drink. She needed to calm down.

She can't fully explain what happened next. Something went. The waiting, the ringing, covering for him in front of his own children, being pregnant, months of things she'd swallowed.

And before she'd decided anything, she slapped him across

the face. In the car park. In front of his friends. Hard, as it turned out, because she'd never hit anyone in her life and had no idea how hard she could.

She was shocked at herself before he'd even reacted. This wasn't her.

She went home and messaged his mum to apologise. She meant it then and she means it now. She's never once said what she did was alright.

Then he was the victim. For weeks. How dare she. He told everyone. The interview that never happened didn't come up once. The children left with a pregnant woman under false pretences didn't come up. The phone he didn't answer didn't come up. She was the violent one, the story had been neatly rewritten, and she was too ashamed to argue. She let him have that version, because she had done something wrong and couldn't see past it.

Years after she left, he was still bringing it up.

She's thought about that afternoon more times than she can count. Never to excuse it. To understand it. A woman who'd never raised a hand to anyone, pregnant, lied to and left, pushed and pushed until something gave.

That's what they do. They push you past yourself. Past your values. Past who you know you are. And when you finally react, messily, humanly, in a car park, they hold it up as evidence.

She never did it again. Not to him, not to anyone. First and last time.

* * *

Here's what else you might have done.

Sworn back, when you're not a swearer. Called him things

you'd be ashamed for your mum to hear.

Been sarcastic. Cutting. Found the exact sentence that would hurt him most and used it on purpose, because you wanted one thing, just one, to get through to him.

Thrown something. Broken something of his. Stood in a doorway and said we're finishing this. Rung him twenty times. Gone through his phone. Sent messages at two in the morning you'd give anything to unsend.

Turned up somewhere to check he was where he said he was. Recorded him without telling him.

A lot of women's messages from those years aren't calm. Some are sent at 2am, fighting back the only way they had left.

And I hear versions of this all the time. She's the one being held or hurt, she fights to get free, and the only mark anyone can see afterwards is the one she left on him. So that's the one that counts. Some men never have to lay a finger on you at all. They just keep pushing until you react, then point at the reaction. And somehow you end up feeling like you're the one in the wrong.

* * *

Now take some of those apart.

You rang him twenty times. He'd said he was coming home. He didn't. He didn't answer. You were left with the children, or a ruined evening, and no idea where he was, or if he was alive.

He calls that controlling. It's not. It's following up on a promise he broke. There's a word for someone who rings twenty times when a person vanishes after saying they'd be back. It's worried.

You went through his phone. After months of comments about other women, and stuff about what men are entitled to, and

being told about his ex's body and how other couples do things, and being accused of cheating so often you started wondering why it was on his mind so much.

He made you suspicious, then made your suspicion the problem.

You said you'd leave. You said you'd go to the police. He calls those threats. They weren't. A threat is something you say to control someone. They were things you were considering, out loud, and you had every reason to.

* * *

Underneath all of it is something simple.

When someone is cruel and nothing you say gets through, you get crueller, because cruel is the only thing that registers. When someone's behaving like a lunatic, you end up behaving like a bigger one, because that's what's left. When someone shouts over you, you shout louder.

You weren't escalating for the sake of it. You were trying to get through to someone, and every reasonable way had been used up.

* * *

There's a name for what you were doing all those years. JADE. Justify, argue, defend, explain.

She asks him not to book things that affect her without checking first. Calmly.

He pushes back. She justifies. I'm not being difficult, I just think I should get a say.

He says she's controlling. She defends. I'm not controlling, I

just want to be included.

He says she makes everything an issue. She explains. I don't want to make it an issue, my time just matters too.

Four minutes later, she's apologising.

She had a reasonable boundary. She said it clearly. And he never moved an inch. She justified it, argued for it, defended it and explained it until there was nothing left of her. She did all the work and still lost.

That's the function. Every minute you spend defending yourself is a minute nobody's talking about what he did. Your energy has to go somewhere, and he makes sure it goes into your own defence. You'll spend a whole evening proving you're not controlling, and by the end neither of you remembers what he actually did. You could go decades and never get to the point.

There's a name for how he does it. DARVO. Deny, Attack, Reverse Victim and Offender.

Say you've actually caught him out. You find a flirty message he's sent another woman, and you bring it up.

First he denies it. I didn't send that, you've read it wrong. Then he attacks. Why are you going through my phone? This is what you're like. Then he swaps the roles round. I can't live like this. I'm the one being treated like a criminal in my own house.

Thirty seconds in, nobody's talking about the message, and nobody ever will. You came in with a fair complaint and left apologising for how you found out.

Researchers named it because it's so consistent. Same steps, same order, in house after house, by men who've never met. If it can be predicted, it isn't a man losing his temper. It's a method.

* * *

So by the end, you've said some things. He's probably got screenshots of the worst. He might have shown people.

I hate you. I wish you were dead. Some days I hate being a mum.

You meant none of it. You said it because you were desperate to be heard by someone who'd stopped hearing you years ago. At two in the morning, after another one, something says the worst thing in your head just to see if anything gets a reaction.

Those things were said to be heard. His were said to have an effect. That's the whole difference.

And you felt sick about it straight away. You apologised, probably more than once. He kept the screenshot.

And some men film it. Push and push until you're screaming, then the phone comes out. Look at what you're like. Nothing before it is on the video. Just you.

* * *

So here's how you tell the difference.

His was a method. Yours was a response.

His happened on ordinary Tuesdays when nothing had gone wrong. Yours happened at the end of something.

His was calm. Yours was the opposite of calm, which is exactly why it looked worse.

And this one settles it. When he stopped, you stopped. Every time. You've never once carried on after he backed off, because you weren't running anything. You were reacting to it. He didn't stop when you stopped. That's what a method is.

You've never done it to anyone else. Not your mum, your mates, a colleague, the man after him. If you had a temper, it'd have shown up somewhere else by now. It was never a temper.

It was a response to one man.

He knows that. He'll still tell people you're the aggressive one. He'll bring out that one incident at a family do, years later, with a little laugh. He'll be the victim of this for the rest of his life. That's not a mistake he's making. It's the job the story does.

One woman I know spent most of a ten year relationship believing she was the abusive one. She'd been told it often enough, and she had a couple of moments she could point to. It took her a long time to see she was the only one in that house who ever stopped.

* * *

Two straight things before we move on.

Some of you are in a relationship where you were both doing harm. That exists. It's not what's in this book. If that's yours, the useful question isn't who started it. It's what you want to do next.

And the practical one. Your reactions can be used against you. In court, in mediation, with social services. He'll have the screenshots and the video and none of his own, because his didn't leave any.

That isn't fair. It's why, from today, however provoked you are, the calmer the record you leave, the better. Not because you were wrong. Because the paperwork doesn't know what happened in your kitchen.

* * *

Silk is unbelievable stuff. When something hits a web, the whole thing gives. It moves with the hit, spreads it out, soaks it up,

and then settles back exactly as it was. A rigid web would snap. This one takes whatever you've got.

Every time you hit it with everything you had, all that force went into something built to absorb it. The web was fine afterwards. You weren't.

And to anyone watching from the garden, the only thing moving was you.

Who Would Have Believed Me?

Your friends come to stay, and when you all get back from a night out there's a bottle of water by every bed, so nobody wakes up with a hangover.

They're in love with him. Oh, he's so lovely. You're so lucky.

And in that moment, he was lovely. That's what's so hard to explain. The charm was real. It was just switched on for an audience.

Nobody sees behind the front door. They see the bottles of water.

* * *

So when you think about telling someone, the first problem is there's nobody left. Nobody close enough. Nobody who'd take one look at you and know, without you having to build a case, that you don't make things up.

Those are exactly the people who drifted. We've already been through how.

So you think about the others. The police. Social services. Your

GP. Someone at work. The teacher at pick up. And you imagine actually saying it, and you stop.

* * *

Try it now. Say some of it out loud.

He won't let me eat steak.

Things go missing and then turn up again.

He frightens me, but the last time it kicked off, I was the one who pushed him.

I think he's been watching me, but I've never found a camera.

I'm not allowed to lock the bathroom door.

I apologised for a door he kicked in.

Every one of those is true. Every one sounds ridiculous.

That's not you explaining it badly. That's what this is. It's built out of things that don't survive being said in one sentence.

And usually there's no evidence. Sometimes there are bruises. Often there's nothing at all. Nothing to photograph. Nothing to hand over. Just you saying what happened, and him saying it didn't.

You already know what he'll do when it's his turn, because you've watched him in your kitchen a hundred times. He'll deflect. He'll turn it round. He'll be hurt. Reasonable. Terribly worried about you. By the end, you'll be the one who's done something, and he'll be the one it was done to.

He's had years of practice. You've had none.

So many women are stuck with one foot in and one foot out. They want to make the call, but they're terrified they'll look stupid and he'll spin the whole thing.

And some of it is so strange you don't fully believe it yourself. You were there. You watched it happen. And you still catch

yourself thinking, did it really go like that? If you can't get there, what chance has a stranger got?

Then there's the part of you that feels stupid. You'd have told any friend of yours to walk years ago, and meant it, and you can't explain why you haven't. That's not because you're weak or thick. He built this quietly, before you knew anything was being built.

And a lot of it is too small to say. He gets funny about the thermostat. Who's ringing anyone about that? You didn't live with one thread. You lived with all of them, at once, for years. No single piece explains the whole, which is why you've never managed to explain it to anyone.

* * *

There's one nobody says out loud.

You'd be sat in front of someone with your hair done, in a nice coat, saying all this. And you'd know how you looked.

Well put together women get believed less. You know that. So you never went.

* * *

Sometimes the first person to say it out loud is a stranger. A woman I know went to marriage counselling, and in the very first session the counsellor heard how she was being spoken to and stopped it. He said basic respect wasn't optional. It was the starting point, and there was nothing to build on without it.

For years she'd believed that if she behaved better, it wouldn't happen. A stranger told her in one sentence that it was never about what she did.

* * *

It's better than it used to be.

People do get convicted of coercive control. Not enough, not easily, but it happens, without a single bruise.

Police, social workers, family courts and health visitors are being trained in this now. They're getting better at seeing through a charming man. A lot of them know exactly what a well put together woman with a good coat and a bad marriage looks like, because they meet her all the time.

You might still get someone who doesn't get it. That's awful when it happens. It doesn't mean the next one won't.

* * *

Whatever anyone else decides, trust your own account.

If it felt traumatic, it was. That's not something someone else gets to grade. If it changed how you live, how you sleep, how you talk to people, it mattered, and no amount of him calling it nothing makes it nothing.

You'll hear he didn't mean it. That's just how he is. He's had a hard life.

Fine. It changes nothing. Meant or not, nobody's allowed to treat you like that. A reason isn't the same as permission.

But let's test that, while we're here.

Has he ever lost it like that at work, in front of his boss?

Has he ever called his mum a cunt?

Has he ever told one of his mates what to wear on a night out, or rung him twenty times to find out where he was?

No.

So he isn't a man who can't control himself. He's a man who

controls himself perfectly well all day, in every other room he's ever stood in, and then chooses where to let it out.

You're not describing something unbelievable. You're describing something he only ever does where nobody's watching.

Why Do I Still Miss Him

The questions you ask yourself at one in the morning.

You know what he did. You don't want to be with him. You've probably got a fair idea by now whether it was abuse.

So why are you this sad? Why are you crying over him? Why do you still love him? Why are you thinking about going back, when you know how that ends, because you've done it before, once, or twice, or more than you'd admit to anybody?

And why, if you're honest, are you hoping he texts? That he says sorry properly this time. Owns it. Means it.

You know he won't. You're still hoping.

Nothing's gone wrong with you. I haven't met a woman who left this and didn't feel some version of this. Every one of them thought she was the only one, and every one of them was ashamed of it.

* * *

Most women leave more than once. Each time, he comes after her with exactly the words she needs. He'll get help. It'll be like

it was at the start. And she goes back, sometimes because she's just found out she's pregnant.

Each time, she comes back further in than before. She's seen him be better, so every time he isn't, she's left asking what she's done wrong.

* * *

So here's what you're actually missing. It isn't him.

It's the man from the first six months. The one who rang, who turned up, who made you feel picked.

That man was a performance. You know that now, and it makes no difference to how much you want him back.

That's why this grief is so strange and so stuck. You're grieving someone who didn't exist. There's nobody to be angry at for taking him, because the man you want was only ever a promise.

And it is grief, even though nobody calls it that. You can't concentrate. You read the same page four times. You go upstairs and stand there. You're tired in a way sleep doesn't touch, then you can't sleep anyway. You cry at an advert. A song in the supermarket car park. And you're doing all of that while working, running a house and being a mum, and none of it's getting done properly, and you know it isn't.

One woman I know is about the least dramatic person you could meet. She said breaking that bond was the most painful thing she'd ever been through. It felt like she was dying in her body. She had no idea emotional pain could feel like that. It does pass. But nobody warns you.

Nobody treats it as a loss. No card. No time off. No funeral, no casseroles, nobody saying take as long as you need. What you

get is people telling you you're well rid.

So you grieve quietly, on your own, while acting relieved for everyone else. Which is more or less what you were doing before you left.

* * *

There's a reason it got into you this deep, and it isn't romance.

In that house, your body was braced. Always on. Reading the room.

Then he'd stop. He'd be nice. Bring something home. Just be normal for an evening.

And the relief was enormous. Your whole body coming down off it.

Here's the cruel bit. He caused the stress, so he was the only one who could end it. For years your body learned one thing, hundreds of times over. He's where the relief comes from.

And it never came on a schedule. If he'd been lovely every Friday, it wouldn't have hooked you like this. Kindness you can't predict is different. You never stop trying for it.

That's not love. It's not weakness. It's learning, and it works on everyone.

There's a name for this. A trauma bond. It forms when the person who hurts you is also the person who comforts you, and it's one of the strongest bonds there is.

You spent years never knowing which version was walking through the door, so you never once stopped hoping for the good one. That's what you're still doing now. Waiting for the good one to turn up.

* * *

There's also who's left. By the end, your world was him, the children, and work if you still had it. He was your normal.

Losing an abuser means losing your whole day to day life at once.

And then freedom arrives, and a lot of the time it doesn't feel like relief. It feels like falling.

* * *

Then there's the forgetting.

The further you get, the less it hurts. Which sounds good. Except as the pain fades, so does the certainty. Was it actually that bad? He wasn't like that all the time.

It's like giving birth. A few months on you can't call up what the pain felt like, and plenty of women go and do it again. The difference is birth gives you something at the end. There's nothing at the end of this. No part of what he did to you was worth having.

Add years of being told you exaggerate, and you've got a woman with nothing left to remind her and a voice saying she made it up.

One woman told me that when her child was poorly, not long after she left, he was brilliant. Quick to help. Kind. And for a minute she remembered exactly why she'd stayed.

The good version was real. That's what makes it so hard. It just never lasted past breakfast.

* * *

And the practical side is grim. You leave with far less than you came with. No money. Debt in your name. More children.

Maybe no home, no job, no confidence, and no support network, because he saw to that.

And there he is, offering you the version of awful you already know how to survive. You know his moods. You know the rules. You've got years of practice at managing him.

Choosing the devil you know isn't stupid. It's what anyone does when the other option is a blank. Sometimes there's fear in it too. He's said what will happen if you go, and you believed him, because you had good reason to.

And his voice does the rest. Years of being told you're too much, that you're hard work, that you can't cope on your own. That doesn't leave when he does. It takes a long time to get someone's voice out of your head and find your own again. While it's still in there, going back can feel like the sensible option.

If you've gone back, you'll have a reason you tell people. You were pregnant. It was the money. The children. You still loved him. All true, and none of them the real one. The real one is that the person causing the pain was also the only thing that ever made it stop, and no part of you had worked out how to separate the two.

So going back isn't failure. The figure services often quote is that it takes around seven attempts to leave for good. You're not the exception. You're not weaker than everyone who managed it first go, because almost nobody manages it first go. Every time you left, you learned something about how to do it. That includes the times you went back.

* * *

When you leave for good, the promises usually come again. He'll stop drinking. He'll get help. He'll put the family first. In time,

you'll love him again.

Saying out loud that you're not in love with him anymore can be one of the hardest sentences there is.

And even years out, happy, with a life they'd never trade, plenty of women still get the odd day where they wonder if they made too much of it.

I'm not going to tell you this feeling goes by a certain date. What changes isn't that you stop having the thought. It's that the thought stops being in charge. It turns up, you look at it, and you get on with your day instead of ringing him.

* * *

Remember the silk from the start of the book? Stronger than steel for its weight. Tougher than Kevlar. Of course the last bit is the hardest to get off. It was spun right up against you.

Still missing him isn't a flaw in you. It's the last thread. And it's the last one for everybody.

He's Never Laid A Finger On Them

I left this one until late on purpose. You needed the rest of the book first. Take your time. You can put it down.

* * *

One woman I know was playing on the floor with her three year old when her daughter looked up and asked, why does daddy make you so sad all the time?

She didn't have an answer.

She'd worked so hard to keep it from her. And at three years old, her daughter could already see the thing she'd been working so hard not to see.

In that silence, something changed in her for good. If she stayed, if she let her daughter watch her accept it, how could she ever stand in front of her one day and tell her she deserves more?

* * *

Here's something you probably don't know.

In 2021 the law in England and Wales changed. Children are now recognised as victims of domestic abuse in their own right. Not witnesses. Victims.

And it doesn't only count if they saw something. It covers a child who sees, hears, or experiences the effects of it. It took until 2021 for anyone to write that down, which tells you how long everybody got it wrong.

Experiences the effects. That's the child who was upstairs. The child who came down to a strange atmosphere the next morning. The child who never saw a single thing and lived in all of it anyway.

* * *

So, what you've been telling yourself. They didn't see anything. They were in bed. He's never laid a finger on them.

All of that can be true. And they still knew.

Children read the temperature of a house long before they've got words for it. They can't tell you what coercive control is. They can tell you exactly what kind of night it's going to be from how a car door shuts.

Think about what yours did. Went quiet when they heard the key. Asked if Daddy was in a good mood before asking for anything. Got very, very good. Or got very loud at exactly the worst moment, because attention on them was attention off you.

They were doing what you were doing. Reading him. They were just smaller.

And for some of you, he wasn't only frightening to be near. He was frightening at them. Shouted at them. Ignored one of them

for a fortnight. Went cold on one of them for days. Punished them way out of proportion. If that's you, everything in this chapter applies twice over.

Some women find that after they leave, their children start coming home and telling them things. Threats about their things getting broken. Said so matter of factly, like it was normal. Because for them, it had become normal.

And when she raises a concern, it becomes an attack on him. Is she saying the children aren't safe with their own dad?

* * *

You did everything you could to keep it from them. Upstairs, telly on, early bedtimes. Rows in the car. Saving your face until you got to the bathroom.

Every woman I know did all of that too.

It didn't work. And I need you to hear the rest of that sentence, because the first half on its own is cruel. It didn't work, and nothing would have. No woman in your position has ever managed it.

You weren't failing. You were doing the only thing you could, frightened and exhausted.

* * *

Here's how you know it got through.

Wetting the bed again, at seven, at nine, at eleven. Not sleeping in their own room, or only with your door open. Tummy aches every Friday, which happens to be his day. Stood on the doorstep not wanting to get in the car, and not able to tell you why. Coming home and falling apart over a yoghurt for forty

minutes. School ringing because they've hit out or shouted at a teacher. Or the opposite, which nobody rings about: very quiet, very polite, disappearing in their own classroom. Following you from room to room. Asking you, a lot, if you're alright.

You've probably had at least one of those explained to you as a phase, or tiredness, or something they'll grow out of.

One woman's daughter had pains that came and went for a long time. Her ear. Her tummy. Her ankles. She took her to the doctor every time. Once her daughter stopped spending time somewhere that made her anxious, the pains stopped too.

Children's bodies are very honest. They say what their mouths can't yet.

* * *

Now the bit nobody says out loud, so I will.

They're horrible to you. Not to him. To you.

They lie about things that don't matter. They're mean. They seem to have no empathy at all. They say things that would take your breath away from anyone else. And you've caught yourself thinking something that frightened you. You sound exactly like your dad.

Then you felt sick for thinking it.

I hear this constantly. Every woman who says it thinks she's the only one, and that it means something terrible about her child or about her.

Here's why it happens.

You're the safe one. Children take everything they're carrying to the person they're certain will still be there afterwards. They don't do it to him, because they're not sure of him. It's a compliment, delivered in the worst possible way.

They learned how arguing works from watching him. They're not being him. They're using the only model they've got.

They feel guilty. This catches the older ones especially. They were eight, and they've been carrying it. Some part of them thinks they should have stopped it or protected you. A child who feels they let you down doesn't tell you. It comes out as anger, at you.

And he's the fun one. No rules, no bedtime, no vegetables. You've got homework and teeth. When they have to pick, they pick what costs them least.

Sometimes he helps that along. He asks them about your house. He's sad when they leave and lets them see it, so they come back to you carrying it.

Some children go cold on you completely and repeat his words in his tone. That's one of the most painful things there is, and it isn't the end of the story. Children often come back, sometimes in their teens, on their own, having worked it out.

* * *

If there's more than one, watch for him splitting them. One's the favourite, the easy one. One carries everything, usually the one who looks like you, or answers back, or has noticed the most. Then little comments to one about the other. Your sister's hard work. Your brother's getting like your mum.

That stops them comparing notes. Two children on the same side would eventually sit on a bed and say, is it just me? Two children set against each other never have that conversation.

It's the same thing he did to your friendships, done to your kids.

When a woman in one of my groups asked if anyone else's

partner picked on one child more than the others, the replies came in fast. Little things about that child irritating him. Being close to the children until they were old enough to see through him, then turning on them. The older ones being called spoilt for not wanting to see him, while only the youngest got taken out. Reminding children they weren't really his. Different houses. Same thing.

And they can't be honest in either house. They can't tell you about his, because it feels like telling on him. They can't tell him about yours, because it comes back at them. So they carry two lives and edit themselves in both, and the person they're most careful around is whoever they're sat with. If yours goes quiet when you ask how the weekend was, that's usually what it is. Not that something terrible happened. That telling the truth costs them something, and they've learned not to pay it.

* * *

Now the word you're scared of. Alienation.

You're scared he's turning them against you. Sometimes he is. Everything in this chapter is how that happens, and it's rarely as obvious as him saying bad things about you. But there's a second half you need to hear from me before a solicitor's letter.

You might get accused of it yourself.

A child doesn't want to go. You don't force them, because who forces a distressed child into a car? And that gets written down as you blocking contact. Then as you influencing them.

It's one of the most frightening things that happens to women in this position, and it happens all the time. Keep it boring and keep it written down. Facts, dates, what was said. No opinions about him anywhere. And get proper advice early, before it's

gone wrong. Plenty of solicitors offer a free first call.

* * *

They won't all remember it the same.

Your eldest might remember everything. Every row, every silence, the night the door went. That child was awake for all of it and probably took on far more than you knew. Your youngest might remember almost nothing. And one day that child might tell you it wasn't that bad, Dad's alright.

It'll sound like his voice coming out of your child, and it'll knock you for six. It isn't disloyalty. They grew up in it at different ages. They didn't live through the same thing.

* * *

Then the fears. You've probably never said these to anyone.

Will my son turn into him? Will my daughter end up with one? Have I started a cycle they'll do to someone else? I picked him. I made these children with him. And I'm tied to him for eighteen years. Longer.

That last one is a real loss. You left, and you still don't get to leave. It deserves grieving.

On picking him: you picked a man who was showing you a version of himself built to be picked. Every woman in this book chose him. That's what the first six months were for. That's the tactic working, not a flaw in you.

On the cycle: a pattern learned in a house can be unlearned. It isn't in their genes. What makes the difference isn't whether they saw it. It's whether anyone ever explained it to them.

* * *

So talk to them.

Not about the details. Not about court or money or what he did to you. That isn't theirs to carry.

But the silence isn't protecting them. They already know something's wrong. What they don't have is an explanation, so they make their own. And the explanation a child reaches for is almost always: it's me. Or this is normal and I should be able to cope.

You staying quiet doesn't spare them that. It just leaves them alone with it.

What helps is smaller than you'd think. Naming feelings. Telling them the truth in a way that fits their age. Letting them say they didn't like something without jumping in to defend anyone. Saying something wasn't okay, without a speech. Letting them say they miss him without you flinching.

You don't have to run him down. Don't. Some women still help the children buy him a Father's Day present every year, because it matters to the children that they can give their dad something. But you don't have to lie for him either. That's the bit most of us get wrong, because we're so frightened of being accused of turning them against him that we say nothing at all.

There's a lot of ground between slagging him off and pretending everything was fine. That ground is where your children need you.

I went looking for a book that would help a mum do that, something that would explain it without naming it. I couldn't find one. So I wrote it.

* * *

A web doesn't only catch what it was built for.

The spider builds it for one thing, at one height, in one doorway. And everything else that crosses it gets caught too. Moths. Midges. Things that were never the target.

The web doesn't check.

That one was built for you. He'd tell you that himself, and he'd mean it. He'd believe the children weren't in it.

But they were in the same house. They crossed it every day. Not because you let them. It was strung across the whole of their childhood, and there was no way through the room without touching it.

The Whole Web

Near the start, I said I'd take this apart one thread at a time, and near the end I'd put it all back together.

This is that bit.

On its own, every chapter in this book sounds like nothing. A man who does the money. A man who doesn't like your friend. A man who gets funny if you're late. That's how it's been explained away for years. By him, by other people, and by you.

So let's put the threads back where they were and look at how they hold each other up.

* * *

Start with the money.

You had no money of your own, so leaving wasn't really an option. So you had to make it work. So when he said you'd agreed to something you hadn't, you went along with it rather than have the row. That's the money holding the gaslighting up.

And once you'd been told for years that you misremember things, a threat doesn't get taken seriously by you either. He said something about a knife and you thought, I'm reading too much into it. Because you'd been trained to think that about everything.

Because of the threat, you go careful. You watch his face. You get the house right. That's the eggshells, and they're not really about the house. They're about what happened last time.

And you don't leave over the eggshells, because two weeks ago he cried and promised, and you got a fortnight of the man you met.

And you can't check any of it with anyone, because there's nobody left to ring.

Any one of those on its own, you'd have got out of. It's the way they hold each other up that makes it a web. That's why you can't answer the question of what was actually wrong. It wasn't one thing. It was all of them, propping each other up, and you were stood in the middle trying to work out which one to pull.

And it doesn't stop there.

The generosity at the start left you feeling you owed him, so you let the first things go. The work trap meant you were wrong whether you earned or not, so you stopped trying to win. His rules only ever applied to you, so you got used to being the only one who had to explain herself. The phone and the watching meant that even when you did talk to someone, you were careful what you said. The comments and the jokes meant you stopped trusting how you looked and how you sounded. When you finally snapped, he had his proof that you were the problem. With his charm on show to everyone else, you were sure nobody would believe you, so you didn't try. The children meant you'd put up with nearly anything to keep their lives calm. And underneath

all of it was the bond he'd built between the worst of him and the relief of him being nice again. That's the trauma bond, and it's what kept pulling you back to the web even when you could see bits of it.

Each one makes the next one work. Pull one and the others take the strain.

* * *

Now look at what all of that adds up to.

A woman who checks herself before she does anything. Who's quieter than she used to be. Who's stopped wearing what she likes, stopped saying what she thinks, stopped ringing her sister. Who doubts her own memory. Who says sorry first. Who can't explain what's wrong, because nothing on its own is wrong enough.

That isn't who you are. That's what the web does to whoever's caught in it.

And a woman like that finds it very hard to question anything, let alone leave. That's not a side effect. That's what it was built for.

* * *

So why didn't you say something?

Because your body was keeping you safe.

When you live with someone who could go off at any minute, your body stops worrying about what's fair and starts worrying about what's safe. It reads the room before you've walked in. It goes quiet. It agrees. It smooths things over. It does whatever gets you through the next hour without a row.

That isn't weakness. Your body worked out, correctly, that in that house, keeping quiet was the safest thing you could do. Questioning him cost you. Saying nothing cost you less. So you said nothing. Anyone would.

That's why you can know something's wrong and still not do anything about it. Your head and your body were answering different questions. Your head was asking, is this right? Your body was asking, how do I get through tonight? And your body wins that one every time.

* * *

People love to say, focus on what you can control.

That's exactly what you were doing. You just didn't know it.

You couldn't control him. You couldn't control his moods, or what would set him off, or when the nice version would come back. So you put everything into the bits you could. The house. The tea. The kids' bedtime. Your tone. What you wore. What you said and how you said it.

You got very good at it. Most of us do.

But while you were busy keeping your corner of the web just right, you weren't looking at the web. You couldn't. It was too big, and it was never yours to fix. So you looked at the threads in front of you, because they were the only ones you could do anything about.

That's why you never saw the whole thing. Not because you weren't clever enough. Because you were coping.

* * *

So. Was it abuse? Or just a toxic relationship?

Here's how you'll know.

Look at the behaviours, not the labels. Not one bad night. A pattern. Was it two people fighting, both giving as good as they got and both alright afterwards? Or was it one person setting the rules, holding the money, deciding who you saw, and making you pay when you got it wrong?

Look at the power. Who had to explain themselves? Who said sorry? Who was allowed a bad day? If it was always him on one side and you on the other, that isn't toxic. That's control.

Look at what it did to you. We've just been through that. A toxic relationship makes two people unhappy. Abuse makes one of them disappear.

And if you still can't put it into words, trust how it felt. If it doesn't feel right, it probably isn't. You spent years being told your feelings were wrong. They weren't. They were the first part of you that noticed.

If you've seen yourself on page after page of this book, you already have your answer. It wasn't just toxic. It was abuse. And none of it was your fault.

* * *

If you're ever up early enough, before anyone else, you might see a web the way it really is.

Dew settles on every thread. The low sun comes through behind it. And all of a sudden the thing you've walked through a hundred times is lit up. Every thread, every join, every circle, all at once.

That's what this chapter is. Not a new thread. Just the light coming through.

You've seen it now. And once you've seen a web with the light

behind it, you can't unsee it.

Why It Got Worse After I Left

The next three chapters are about after you leave.

If you're still with him, read them anyway. Not because I'm telling you to go. Because if you ever do, it helps to know what might be coming. It's a lot less frightening when it doesn't take you by surprise, and knowing what to expect is part of keeping yourself safe.

* * *

You thought it would stop when you left.

It didn't stop. It changed shape. And nobody warned you, because everyone treats leaving as the end of the story.

So now you're out, and some days you feel worse than when you were in it, and you've started wondering if that means you were wrong to go.

You weren't.

* * *

Look at it from where he's stood.

He put years into this. Picking off your friends. Arranging the money. Learning exactly which sentence stops you in your tracks. That took effort.

And you've just walked out with it.

He's not going to shrug and get on with his life. He's going to try and get the control back, using whatever's still connected to you. Everything in this chapter is that.

* * *

First, the flipping.

One week he's devastated. He's finally seen it. He's getting help. Nobody's ever understood him like you. One more chance.

When that doesn't work, the next week it's the other one. It was always broken anyway. He'd had enough too. He's much happier now.

They look like opposite messages. They're the same message. One's trying to pull you back. The other's trying to make you scared of being left behind, so you come back yourself.

* * *

When neither works, it gets more direct.

Messages. Then calls. Then calls from numbers you don't know. Then he's driving past. Or parked up the road. Then he's at the same supermarket, at the same time, twice.

That's harassment. It's reportable. It doesn't stop being harassment because he's your ex, or because it's only messages. You can write down dates and times. You can ring 101. You don't have to wait for something worse to happen.

* * *

Then he goes through the children, because they're the one link you can't cut.

He's late for pick up. Then he doesn't turn up. Then he changes the plan the night before, after you've booked something.

He brings them back late, or at a different time to the one agreed, or with things missing.

He sends messages that look perfectly reasonable if anyone ever reads them back, and are built to wreck your evening.

He passes things through them. Asks them questions about your house. Sends a message home with a seven year old.

There's always a reason he can't. Work won't let him have the time. The day he'd booked off turns into a day at work after all. The explanations are so detailed you almost believe them.

And the rules about talking get set by him. You're only to message him about the children. Anything else is you being nasty.

He'll agree to something a solicitor or social worker suggests that he flatly refused when you asked for the exact same thing two months earlier. That was never about the arrangement. It was about not giving you what you asked for.

* * *

The money is just the old thread with a new name.

Maintenance that turns up late, or short, or with a comment attached so you have to decide whether it's worth replying. The house sale that never moves. Paperwork he hasn't got round to. A valuation he disagrees with.

Assets that don't get divided, because as long as they aren't, he still has something of yours.

He isn't disorganised. Delay costs you far more than it costs him, and he knows it.

* * *

Then other people.

He got there first with the story, in the first fortnight, and you've been behind ever since. His family, mutual friends, the school gate, people at work. Messages arrive from his mum, his sister, a friend of his, all very concerned, all saying things that came from one place.

Some men take it public. Posts that name no names. Photos with captions. A very obvious new life, performed at you.

And the old move, now in public. Whatever you could say about him, he says about you first. You're the abuser. You're the liar. You're the one who gaslit him.

* * *

The legal bit, kept short, because it isn't my area and you need a solicitor, not me.

The process itself gets used. Letters that are technically about arrangements and really about tone. Applications that achieve nothing and keep you in the system. Missed deadlines so it all goes round again. Every round costs you money and a week of not sleeping.

And threats arrive through a solicitor now, which makes them sound more official than they are. I've worked and she hasn't. If this goes to court I'll be taking everything. A lot of that isn't a

legal position. It's him, in a suit.

Get your own solicitor rather than trying to work out what's real on your own. Plenty offer a free first call. One conversation with someone who does this every day will tell you more than months of worrying.

* * *

Then the hoovering. It's called that because he's trying to suck you back in.

He goes quiet. Weeks of nothing, and you almost relax. Then a message out of nowhere. Something small. An old photo of the kids. Something about a bill. Happy birthday to your mum.

Whatever you do with it, he's found out what he wanted. Whether he can still get a reaction. Then quiet again. Then something bigger.

It's often something so small you feel daft being upset by it. He gets into an account you still share and changes things, just enough for you to notice. A profile gone. A name changed. A picture swapped. Or you change the password and the login codes keep landing in your inbox as he tries to get back in. You're not being pathetic for being upset. That's exactly the reaction it was designed to get. Change the password, set up a new account, and don't reply.

At some point an apology might come, years late, and it won't quite be one. Sorry you felt like that. Sorry things got how they did. You'll read it forty times looking for the bit where he says what he did.

It isn't in there. It never is.

* * *

With children involved, this can run for years.

But it fades, and it fades for a reason that's in your hands. All of it depends on him reaching you. So the less there is to reach, the less there is to do. Fewer replies. Nothing explained. Nothing defended. No reaction to report back on.

It stops being worth his time long before it stops mattering to him.

* * *

Knock a web down in a doorway and it hangs off, half gone, and you think, well, that's that.

Go back to the same doorway in two days. It's back. Same corner. Same height.

The spider doesn't go and find somewhere new. It knows this doorway works. So it rebuilds it right where it was.

You broke it, and he came straight back to the same spot and started putting threads across. Through the children. Through the money. Through his mum. Through a solicitor.

He isn't looking for a new life. He's repairing the old one.

I'm Out, So Why Am I Still Like This?

You did it. You're out. He's not in the house.

So why are you stood in a shop unable to buy yourself a thirty quid coat?

* * *

Everyone talks about leaving like it's the finish line. You get there and find out it's the start of something else.

Here's what it actually looks like.

You can't spend money on yourself. Not can't afford. Can't. You put something back that you could easily pay for, and you don't notice you've done it until you're in the car.

You don't know what you like. Someone asks where you want to eat and there's nothing there. What music, what clothes, not what won't start anything but what you actually like, what do you want to do Saturday? Blank.

Small decisions take forever. Which brand. Which appointment. Which of two perfectly fine options. You go back and forth over nothing and it wears you out.

You're awkward now. You never used to be. You go to something social, hear yourself being odd, saying too much or nothing, and go home and replay it.

You want to message an old friend and you can't. You've written it out and deleted it. It's been three years and you don't know how to explain the three years.

You apologise to people who bump into you. You brace at a raised voice, a car door, a text arriving. You over-explain everything, because for years you needed a reason ready.

And the anxiety turns up with nothing attached. No reason. Just there, on a Tuesday, in your kitchen.

A lot of women wake up with an anxious stomach, every morning, before they've even thought about anything. Your body learned to be on alert the minute you opened your eyes. Some can't eat for weeks and live on yoghurt drinks and shakes. Some still half expect him to walk through the door shouting. One woman asked our group how long it takes for that to stop. The honest answer from the women further along was that it comes in waves, and the waves get smaller. Something that helps a lot of them: sit on the edge of the bed, feet on the floor, one hand on your chest and one on your belly, three slow breaths, and tell yourself you're safe.

Here's one nobody warns you about. Some women are more frightened after they leave than they were living with him. Scared of annoying people. Of doing something wrong. Of making someone sad. Of speaking up for themselves. Someone in one of my groups said she was further into her shell a year out than she'd ever been with him, because at least back then she knew the rules. Another cries if she puts something away in the wrong place, and there's nobody there to mind.

You might still sleep with your phone and your diary under

your pillow, years after anyone last went through them. You might still catch yourself about to ask permission for something that's nobody's business but yours.

If the children have started school and the house is empty all day, and you've no idea who you are when you're not being a mum, that's part of it too. You were only allowed to be one thing for a long time.

And everyone thinks you should be free and happy now. You're out, isn't that what you wanted? So when you're a mess, you decide something must be wrong with you. Nothing's wrong with you. This is what it looks like.

* * *

None of that is a bad memory. It's training.

For years, in hundreds of small lessons every day, you were taught that wanting things costs you, deciding is risky, people go cold without warning, and you'd better have an explanation ready.

You learned it properly. Better than most things you've ever learned, because the stakes were high and the lessons never stopped.

Learning doesn't undo itself just because things have changed. Your head knows he's gone. The rest of you hasn't been told. That isn't permanent damage. It comes undone the way it went in. Slowly.

* * *

Here's one about some chalk.

Picture a woman three years out. She'd done the work. Read

the books, had the conversations, built a life. She'd have told you she was healed, and meant it.

Her children were drawing on the pavement outside the house. Chalk. The kind that washes off the first time it rains.

A neighbour came out and started on her. Loud, in the street, in front of them. She was a disgrace. A disgraceful parent.

She nearly cried. On her own path. Over chalk.

The only thing that stopped her was her children stood next to her, watching. So she kept her voice normal, got them inside and shut the door.

Then she was furious. Not about the chalk. Because he'd brought that into her children's day, in front of them, when keeping that out of their lives was the thing she'd worked hardest at.

That night, once they were in bed, she fell apart. She's not a crier. She sat there in bits and couldn't work out what was wrong with her.

When she saw it, it was obvious. It was never about the chalk. It was the confrontation. Sudden, loud, way out of proportion, aimed at her, for doing nothing.

Her body didn't know the difference between a bitter man on a pavement and the man she used to live with. It did exactly what it used to. Freeze. Brace. Work out what she'd done wrong.

Three years of work, and forty seconds of a raised voice took her straight back.

Then she went on the local mums' group and asked if she'd been in the wrong. About children's chalk. That washes off in the rain.

That's what years of being told you're wrong about everything does. She couldn't trust her own judgement on something a five year old could have ruled on.

The women on that group were brilliant. One offered to come round and draw something very rude on his doorstep. She felt better than she had all week.

* * *

Healing doesn't mean it never happens again. Anyone telling you that is selling something.

It means it happens, and you recognise it. At one year out, you'll probably think something is badly wrong with you. Further on, you can sit down, work out what's been set off, and know it'll pass.

So when it happens to you, and it will, ask: what did that remind my body of? The volume? The surprise? The unfairness? Being blamed for something innocent? Someone stood too close?

Then have something you do. Breathing. A walk. Ringing one person. Whatever gets you back in the room.

You'll still get knocked. You just stop thinking it means you're back at the start.

* * *

Here's what nearly everyone gets wrong. You can't tear it down in one go.

You can't decide to be over it. You can't have a good cry and wake up fixed. You can't read one book, including this one, and be done. And you definitely can't do it by a date you've set yourself, which is what most of us try, usually about a year out, usually right before we feel like we've failed at recovering too.

It comes apart thread by thread. And that's better news than it sounds, because the threads are small and you can see them.

The coat is a thread. You buy it, bring it in the front door, and nothing happens. That one's gone, and it doesn't come back.

Working out what you like is a thread. You do it the boring way, trying things, like you did at nineteen. Some of it you'll get wrong. That's allowed now.

The friend is a thread. You send the message. It might be a bit awkward. Almost every time, she's relieved. She's been wondering about you for years and didn't know if she was allowed to ask.

Another woman had been cut off from her friends for years. When she hit rock bottom, they were the ones who turned up. She said she'd spent all that time thinking they'd gone, when really they'd just been waiting for her to let them back in.

Saying no without a reason attached. Thread.

Letting someone be annoyed with you and not fixing it. Thread.

Making a small decision fast, on purpose, just to prove you can. Thread.

Getting through a whole day without apologising for existing. That one takes a while.

* * *

It isn't a straight line. You'll have three brilliant weeks and then something will knock you for six. You haven't gone backwards. You'll get further on some threads than others. You'll be fine about money and still unable to answer what you fancy for tea.

And some of it is bigger than a book. If you've got nightmares, or panic, or you can't function, that isn't you being dramatic,

and it isn't something to wait out on your own. There are people who do this for a living and they're good at it.

But here's the only promise in this book I'm sure of. You come back.

Not the woman you were before him. She doesn't exist anymore, and you wouldn't want her. She didn't know any of this. A different one. One with opinions again. One who orders what she wants. One who can walk into a room without checking the weather in it first.

It sneaks up on you. You won't get a day where it's finished. One day, months from now, you'll realise you just did something without running it past an invisible man, and you'll stop in the middle of the kitchen.

That's what the work gets you. Not closure. Not an apology. Not him admitting it. You.

* * *

Remember walking into that web in the garden, right at the start of this book? Wiping at your face and your hair, doing the dance.

Most of it comes away in one go. The shape's gone. It isn't a web anymore.

But there's always a bit left. A thread across the back of your hand. One in your hair you find an hour later. You think you've got it all, and there's another.

Leaving is the wipe. It gets you out of the web, and it's the biggest thing you'll ever do. But some of the threads come with you, and they don't come off in one go. You take them off one at a time.

You do it by changing how you think about what happened. By letting your feelings catch up with your new life, which takes

longer than your head would like. And by giving yourself the time to heal.

Thread by thread. Until one day you realise you haven't found one on you for a while.

The One Before You And The One After You

When you go back over the start, there's often one thing you keep coming back to.

His ex tried to tell you.

Maybe she messaged. Maybe she said something at a handover. Maybe it came through a friend of a friend. However it reached you, you did nothing with it. And now you'd give anything to go back and listen.

You couldn't have listened. Look at when it came. You were in the first few months, being told you were his soulmate, happier than you'd been in years. And you'd already been told all about her. Bitter. Jealous. Never accepted it was over.

So when she said be careful, it didn't sound like a warning. It sounded exactly like what he'd said she'd do.

The harder she tried, the more she sounded like the woman he'd described. That wasn't your bad judgement. It was a trap she walked into on your behalf.

* * *

Now he's moved on. Of course he has. Quickly, probably. Publicly, definitely.

Some women end up meeting her. One did, and found she was lovely. Warm, kind, the sort of woman you'd be relieved to have around your children. And she felt so sad for her, because she'd been her, she knew how her story went, and she couldn't say a word.

* * *

It hurts, him moving on, even when you don't want him back. Even when you've just read a whole book about what he is.

She looks gorgeous. She looks like fun. She's confident. She's out doing things. They're posting photos looking delighted with each other. And you're feeling like the shell of yourself that's left, comparing the worst version of you to the best version of her.

Here's what you need to know about that photo. You were her. That was you, three years ago, posting the same thing, telling everyone how lucky you were.

And she's going to be you. Not today. But she's on the same road, and it only goes one place.

Another woman got talking to his next partner after they split, and asked if he'd done the same things. Not quite. With the first, he went for her independence. Her work. Her wage. With the second, it was her looks.

Whatever matters most to you, that's where he goes. Same man. Different weak spot.

* * *

The thing you're fighting the urge to do. You want to message her.

You've drafted it. You want to tell her what he's really like. Tell her about Clare's Law, which lets you ask the police if a partner has a history of abuse. Send her a list of red flags. I'm not being funny, I just don't want you to lose five years like I did.

It comes from the best part of you. She won't listen.

A woman I know did tell his new girlfriend. Told her about the cheating and the rest of it. The girlfriend thanked her, and a couple of weeks later they were moving in together.

She's being love bombed right now. Being told she's the one. Feeling picked. He's selling her the same story he sold you, and you of all people know how good he is at it. And unless you've lived through this, an ex getting in touch to warn you doesn't feel like a warning. It feels like drama. A woman who can't move on.

The only woman who hears a warning from an ex and thinks, that's the biggest red flag there is, is a woman who's been through something like it already. And she's watching for the other signs anyway. She'll get there on her own.

The women who'd listen don't need the message. The women who need it won't listen.

That's your answer about the woman before you, too. Why she didn't say more, or gave up so fast. She'd worked out what you've just worked out. She knew you weren't ready to hear it. She may have tried it with someone before you and had it thrown back at her. And warning the next one costs something. It can be used against you as harassment. It can end up in a court bundle. It can set him off in a way that falls on you or your children for months. She might have had more to lose than you realised. So

might you.

And if you're still with him, there may be a woman out there right now who was there before you. She knows what he's like. She might even have thought about telling you. She just decided it wasn't the right time, or the right place, or that you wouldn't believe it coming from her. If she ever does say something, now you'll know why it took her so long.

I'm not telling you never to do it. That's yours to decide, and some women do it and don't regret it. Just know what it will and won't do first.

There's a better version that costs nothing. If she ever comes to you, be there. Some of them do, a year or four years on, when the fog clears. Don't say I told you so. Don't make her apologise for not listening. Just say: I believe you. It happened to me too.

That's worth a hundred messages sent today.

* * *

And protect your peace while you're here.

Unfollow him. All of it. You don't have to announce it.

Stop reading her posts. You know what it's doing to you.

Decide in advance what you'll reply to. Contact arrangements, yes. Anything else, no. Then you're not deciding fresh every time your phone goes.

And be honest about what the checking is. You're not looking at her. You're looking for proof he's better with her. Because if he's kinder to her, then it was never him. It was you.

He won't be. He's doing to her, right now, quietly, what he did to you. You'll never see the proof, because it'll be happening behind a front door, in a house where everything looks lovely in the photos.

Just like yours did.

And know what one look can cost you. Another woman had been doing brilliantly for nearly three months. Then somebody sent her a screenshot of his new profile picture, the two of them together, and by lunchtime she felt like she was back at the day she left. Nothing had changed except what she'd seen.

* * *

Something that surprises a lot of women. Some of the best friendships they have afterwards come out of this. Women they'd never have met otherwise. Some were with the same man. Some with a different one who behaved exactly the same. It's a rotten way to meet people, and they can be some of the most solid friendships of your life.

Hold onto that when you feel like you've come out of this with nobody.

A woman joined one of my groups recently. By the next day she said she felt like she could breathe again. That's what being around women who get it does.

* * *

So if warning her doesn't work, what does?

Talking. Just not at her.

Everything you now understand, you got from somewhere. A story. A video. A woman in a group describing her own kitchen, and you recognised yours.

Nobody warned you about him, and it wouldn't have worked if they had. What worked was a woman describing her own life, out loud, and you seeing yourself in it.

That's the only thing that's ever worked. It's how this book exists.

So get louder, if it's safe and legal for you. That isn't a throwaway line. If he's dangerous, if you're in court, if there's anything at stake, say nothing. You're not letting anyone down.

And louder doesn't mean a stage, or social media, or your real name anywhere. It can mean one person. The woman at work who's gone quiet. The cousin who keeps cancelling. The mum at the school gate who checks her phone before she answers a simple question.

You don't have to diagnose her or warn her about anyone. Just say one true thing about yourself.

I was in something like that once. It took me a long time to work out what it was.

That's it. She'll say something back or she won't. Either way, you've put a door in a wall she didn't know had one.

You don't need to be recovered to do it. You don't need the right words. You are, right now, more use to a woman in that position than any leaflet she'll ever be handed.

* * *

Eventually, when there's nothing left to tie to, a spider gives up on that doorway. It goes somewhere else and starts again.

That's what he'll do. You can't stop it and it isn't your job.

But you'll never walk into that doorway blind again. You'll know what to look for in a way you didn't three months ago, and so will every woman who reads this.

You were the woman who couldn't see it. You're not anymore.

And the next one, whoever she is, is going to hear it from someone. It might as well be you.

So What Do I Do Now

You've just read a lot. If you're wrung out, that's normal. It doesn't mean you've gone backwards.

Before anything else, go back to the start for a minute.

Remember the ten groups the researchers counted? Physical abuse. Sexual abuse. Emotional abuse. Money. Isolation. Intimidation. Threats. Male privilege, being treated like staff in your own home. Minimising. Blaming. Eighty four behaviours between them.

How many of them do you think applied to you?

Not to score it. Just so you can see it, all in one place, the way you couldn't before.

And whatever your number is, remember what I said near the beginning. You weren't stupid. You never were. You were held by one of the toughest materials there is, built slowly, by someone who'd done it before.

You don't need to be embarrassed. You don't need to hold onto any guilt, for staying, for going back, or for what you did when you were pushed past yourself. Put the responsibility where it belongs. With the person who did it. Him.

You didn't build this web. You didn't choose to get caught in it. And you didn't deserve a single thread of it.

* * *

If you're still with him

You don't have to decide anything today.

But please don't carry this on your own. Think about telling one person. Just one, someone you trust who won't go straight to him.

And get help from people who do this every day. Ring the helpline at the front of this book, or your local domestic abuse service, or the police. They can help you make a safety plan, whether you're staying for now or thinking about going. You can ring just to ask questions.

If you're thinking about leaving, that plan is the most important thing in this book. Make it before you go, quietly, with someone who knows how.

* * *

Understanding it had to come first. It doesn't fix anything on its own. What it does is stop you spending your energy on the wrong question, which was always some version of: what's wrong with me?

Here's what helps. Not all of it. Pick two.

Breathe out longer than you breathe in. In through your nose for four, out through your mouth for six. Six times. The long breath out is the bit that works. Do it before handovers, before you open his messages, before the school gate.

Write down what you notice. Not for court. Just so the next

time he says it didn't happen, there's a version somewhere that isn't in his handwriting.

Get one person. Not everyone. One. The friend who never asked why you stayed. Tell her the small things, the ones that sound like nothing. Those are the ones that have been in you longest.

Stop arguing with him in your head. You'll do it anyway, in the car, in the shower, at three in the morning. When you catch yourself, say out loud: he already knows. He was there. The argument you're rehearsing assumes he doesn't understand what he did. He does.

Buy the thing. Something small you'd have hidden. Bring it in the front door and put it away. The first time is stranger than you'd think.

Read someone else's story. For a lot of women this does more than anything. Women you've never met describing your own kitchen back to you. It's different to being told you're not alone. You watch someone else live it and you stop being able to argue that yours was different.

Move your body once a day, badly. A walk to the postbox counts. Fear sits in your body long after the person's gone. Moving is how you tell it the danger's over.

* * *

Some lines to keep. Say them out loud, even though you'll feel daft. Out loud works better.

I wasn't bad with money. I was managing a person.

Tired explains snapping. It doesn't explain a system.

I'm allowed to be proud of what I earn.

When he stopped, I stopped. That's the difference.

Nothing I picked was ever going to be the right answer, so none of it was my fault.

I noticed. I was right.

* * *

It gets better. Slowly, and with bad days in between. But there's a Tuesday coming where you'll get to the end of the day and realise you haven't thought about him once, and it'll shock you.

That day is real. Thousands of women further down this road than you have had it, and they're completely fine.

There's an old saying. It will all come right in the end. When you're in the middle of it, you won't believe it.

It does.

Where To Find Me

Everything's in one place. There's a QR code next to each one if you're reading on paper, and a link if you're not.

My story, in full. *It Will All Come Right in the End.* One woman's story, start to finish, with the real messages, real raw and honest. You can get my memoir here:

UK: https://www.amazon.co.uk/dp/1066649901
US: https://www.amazon.com/dp/1066649901

If you'd rather work through it than read about it. *She Figured It Out.* A workbook. Pick it up after the memoir, or instead of it if you'd rather do the do rather than read.

UK: https://www.amazon.co.uk/dp/B0H6PJXSGX
US: https://www.amazon.com/dp/B0H6PJXSGX

For your children. The books I couldn't find, so I wrote them. One about a grown up who shouts. One about being told something didn't happen. One about two homes that feel like two different worlds. A child can read them without ever being

told what they're about. They're used in family courts and domestic abuse services.

https://www.amazon.com/author/ashlingpodmore

Helping your children through it. Short, practical courses, priced so a woman who left with nothing can afford them, because I was that woman. They're about supporting your children through this, which is the part nobody else covers. Start with the Safe Parent Starter Kit.

https://ashlingpodmore.systeme.io/safeparentstarterkit

All courses: https://ashlingpodmore.systeme.io/courses-mainpage

The free guides.

https://ashlingpodmore.systeme.io/freebies

Come and find me. @ashlingpodmoreofficial on Instagram and Facebook.

* * *

You don't have to do any of it. Closing this book and going to bed is a perfectly good next step.

But if one thing in here made you put your hand over your mouth, come and find me. I'm easier to find than he'd like.