I Knew Better. I Stayed Anyway.

Understanding Why Strong People Don't Leave Narcissistic Relationships — And How to Find Your Way Back



Melissa Bilbruck

TORCH & SOUL

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To my daughter — my greatest support and my greatest joy.
You never stopped believing in me even when I stopped believing in myself.

To everyone who is still in it — this book is for you.
You are not alone. You are not crazy. You are not the problem.

And to everyone who made it out the other side —
welcome home to yourself.

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INTRODUCTION

This book almost didn't get written.

Not because I didn't have things to say. Because for a long time I wondered whether saying them out loud — putting the full truth of what I lived through onto a page for strangers to read — was something I was ready for.

Then I started creating content online. And something happened that I didn't expect.

People found me. Not just a few people. Thousands of people. People who were living what I had lived. People who recognized themselves in every word I said. People who sent me messages saying — I thought I was the only one. I thought something was wrong with me. I thought I was going crazy.

That's when I knew this book needed to be written.

Because the confusion of narcissistic abuse is one of the loneliest experiences a person can have. It's invisible. It leaves no marks that other people can see. It produces a specific kind of internal chaos — a constant questioning of your own mind, your own memory, your own worth — that is almost impossible to explain to someone who hasn't lived it.

But I have lived it. Deeply. Completely. In ways that brought me to my knees before they brought me back to myself.

I am not a therapist. I am not a researcher. I am not someone who read about this from a safe distance and decided to write a book.

I am someone who survived two narcissistic relationships. Who spent three months in near isolation consuming every piece of material I could find trying to understand what was happening to me. Who paid professionals to assess the people I was involved with so I could be certain I was seeing clearly. Who lived through stalking, physical abuse, institutional failure,

and a level of psychological warfare that I couldn't have imagined before I experienced it.

And who came out the other side.

Not broken. Not bitter. Not hardened against love or trust or hope.

Clear. At peace. Genuinely okay — in a way I didn't know was possible when I was deep in the worst of it.

This book is everything I wish someone had put in my hands when I was in the middle of it. The honest explanation of what narcissism actually is. The validation of why strong people stay. The truth about the trauma bond. The acknowledgment of what it costs when the systems that should protect you don't. And the real, unglamorous, quietly powerful experience of finding your way back to yourself.

If you're reading this still in the relationship — this book is for you.

If you're reading this just out of it — this book is for you.

If you're reading this years later still trying to make sense of what happened — this book is for you.

And if you're reading this as a man who has been told this doesn't happen to people like you — this book is especially for you. Because narcissistic abuse doesn't discriminate. And your experience is just as real and just as valid as anyone else's.

Throughout this book I refer to the narcissist as he and him because that reflects my personal experience. But narcissistic abuse happens to men, women, and people of every background. If your narcissist is a woman or a different gender — everything in these pages applies to you completely.

You are not alone in this.

Let's start there.

— Melissa Bilbruck, Torch & Soul

Chapter ONE

I KNEW BETTER

I see you.

I know what you're going through. I know the exhaustion that doesn't have a single source you can point to. I know what it's like to wake up every morning and spend the first few minutes of the day trying to figure out what mood you're walking into. I know the mental math you do before you say anything — is this a safe moment or isn't it.

I know because I lived it.

And here's the thing I need you to hear before anything else in this book:

You are not crazy. You are not weak. You are not the problem.

You are someone whose greatest qualities — your capacity to love, your loyalty, your ability to see the best in people, your willingness to carry what's heavy — got aimed at someone who used every one of them against you.

That's not a character flaw. That's a mechanism. And once you understand the mechanism, everything changes.

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I was a strong person when I got into the relationship that would bring me to my knees. I want to be clear about that because it matters. I wasn't fragile. I wasn't naive. I wasn't someone who didn't know her own mind.

I knew something was wrong early. I could see the pattern forming. I even wrote it down — put it in an email barely a month in — laid out specific incidents, named what I was seeing, asked for something different.

And I stayed anyway.

Not because I was foolish. Not because I couldn't see clearly. But because people like us — empaths, fixers, the ones who see potential where others see a problem — we don't give up on people easily.

We see who they could be. We hold onto the hope that the version of them we fell in love with is the real one and everything else is circumstances, stress, unhealed wounds that our love can reach.

We think if we just communicate better, love more consistently, give a little more patience — something will finally click and the person we know is in there will show up and stay.

That's not weakness. That's one of the most beautiful things about how we're wired.

And it's exactly what got used against us.



Here's what I also know: the person reading this right now is probably strong. Probably capable. Probably the person in every room who holds things together, who shows up for people, who doesn't quit when things get hard.

And that strength — the very thing that makes you who you are — is also the reason you're still in something you know isn't right.

Because strong people don't abandon things that need care. Strong people see potential and work toward it. Strong people believe that if they try hard enough, communicate clearly enough, love deeply enough — things can change.

And a narcissistic relationship is designed — whether consciously or not — to use every one of those qualities to keep you exactly where you are.

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I want to tell you something about where I am now.

I am at peace. Genuine peace — not the kind that comes from telling yourself everything is fine when it isn't, but the kind that comes from having walked through something that should have broken you and discovering that it didn't.

I have a clarity about my own life that I didn't have before. I trust myself in a way that I didn't know was possible when I was deep in the confusion of that relationship. I know what I feel, I trust what I see, and I no longer spend my energy trying to make sense of something that was designed to resist sense.

That's available to you too.

Not immediately. Not without the work of understanding what happened and why. But it's real, and it's waiting, and this book is part of the path to get there.

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This book is not a list of red flags. You probably already know the red flags. You may have been able to name several of them while you were still in the relationship.

Knowing the red flags doesn't explain why you stayed.

This book is about the mechanism — the specific way narcissistic relationships are designed to keep strong, aware, capable people from leaving. Not through obvious force, but through something far more sophisticated.

Through hope. Through confusion. Through the specific vulnerabilities that come with being someone who loves deeply and believes in people.

And it's about how to find your way out — not just physically, but back to yourself. Back to the version of you that existed before the relationship required you to become someone smaller, quieter, more careful.

That version of you is still there.

Let's go find them.

Chapter TWO

HOW THEY GET IN

There's a moment at the beginning of every narcissistic relationship that feels different from anything you've experienced before.

Not just exciting. Not just promising. Different in a way that's hard to articulate — like someone finally tuned to exactly your frequency. Like being genuinely seen for the first time.

That feeling is real. The feeling is completely real even when the person creating it isn't being genuine.

That distinction matters because the shame that comes later — the why didn't I see it, the how did I fall for this — is almost always rooted in the assumption that you should have known better from the start.

You couldn't have known. Here's why.

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They don't arrive obviously.

They don't show up with warning signs attached. They show up as exactly what you needed — not by accident, but because they've identified what that is and they're delivering it with precision.

In my situation, the person I got involved with had known me for years. Not closely — but enough to know the outline of who I was. And that outline was enough for him to fill in the rest with exactly what I needed to hear.

He was done with the nonsense. Ready to settle down. He saw something in me he hadn't seen in anyone else. And because I'd known him for years — because there was shared history, a sense of familiarity — I extended a level of trust I might not have offered someone new.

That's one of the ways they get in. Not always through romance. Sometimes through history. Sometimes through shared community — a church, a workplace, a neighborhood. Sometimes through being the person who shows up exactly when you're at your most vulnerable.

The entry point looks different for everyone. The mechanism underneath it is always the same.

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What's actually happening in those early weeks and months has a name. It's called mirroring.

Mirroring is when someone reflects your own values, your own language, your own way of seeing the world back at you — so precisely that being with them feels like finally being understood rather than like getting to know someone new.

You talk about what matters to you. They value the same things. You describe how you want to be treated. They treat

you exactly that way — at first. You share your beliefs, your hopes for your life. They match it all.

And that feeling — of being known, of being finally seen — is one of the most powerful feelings a human being can experience. Especially for those of us who grew up in homes where being truly seen wasn't guaranteed.

Many of the people who end up in these dynamics grew up in environments that taught us that love requires work. That connection is something you earn. That the people who are supposed to love you most sometimes don't show up the way they should.

When you grow up in chaos, you normalize chaos. When you grow up with love that was conditional or inconsistent or absent, you don't register those same patterns in a relationship as warning signs. You register them as familiar. As home.

I know what it's like to just want to be loved. Unconditionally. Without having to earn it or perform for it or manage someone

else's emotions to access it. That desire is one of the most human things that exists.

And narcissistic relationships exploit that desire specifically. Not because you're broken for having it. Because you're human.

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There's something else worth understanding about why they chose you specifically.

It wasn't random. Narcissists are drawn to empaths because empaths have something they cannot genuinely access — real emotional depth, authentic connection, inner peace that comes from actually feeling things rather than performing them.

There's an envy underneath the attraction. They want what you have. And since they can't genuinely develop it themselves — they attach to the person who has it and extract it instead.

Our empathy is our greatest strength. It's what allows us to feel deeply, to connect genuinely, to show up for people in ways that actually matter.

But in a relationship with a narcissist, that same empathy becomes the vulnerability they build everything else around.

Not because empathy is wrong. Not because feeling deeply is a flaw. But because it was being offered to someone who had no intention of honoring it — only of using it.

You weren't chosen despite your qualities. You were chosen because of them.

There's a difference between your empathy being a vulnerability and your empathy being a flaw. It is not a flaw. It never was. It just got aimed at the wrong person.

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We don't just see who someone is. We see who they could be.

We see potential. We hold space for possibility. We believe in people in a way that goes beyond the evidence in front of us.

In the beginning of a narcissistic relationship, this quality gets activated in a very specific way.

They show you the best version of themselves — attentive, loving, consistent, warm — and your empath instincts record that version as who they are. As their capacity. As proof of what this relationship can be.

So when that version starts to disappear — when the attentiveness fades, when the warmth becomes inconsistent — you don't immediately question whether that person was ever real.

You ask what happened to them.

You start searching for what changed. What you did. What you stopped doing. What you need to do differently to get back to the beginning.

And here's where the internalization begins — the part that keeps people stuck longer than anything else.

When things start to shift in a narcissistic relationship, the empath doesn't point outward at the pattern. The empath turns inward.

What am I doing wrong? How can I communicate this better? What do I need to change?

I did this. I watched myself do it in real time and still couldn't stop it.

That's not stupidity. That's the empath's default setting — we assume responsibility, we look for our part, we ask what we can do to make things better.

It's what makes us good partners, good friends, good people.

And it's exactly what makes us stay long past when we should.

The first thing that happens in the early phase is what's often called love bombing — an intensity of attention, affection, and investment that feels overwhelming in the best possible way. Constant contact. Consistent warmth. The sense that you are the most important thing in their world.

This intensity isn't accidental. It's building something.

It's creating an attachment — a bond formed so quickly and so deeply that when things shift, your nervous system experiences that shift as loss. As something broken that needs to be fixed.

The love bombing phase is the architecture of the relationship. It's building the structure that will hold you in place later when everything changes.

The second thing that happens is that small signs get overridden by big feelings.

Small things that register. A moment where they didn't say thank you. A pattern of showing up for themselves while you showed up for them.

You notice these things. The noticing is real. But the feeling — the intensity of the connection, the hope of what this could be — overrides the noticing.

The self-doubt often starts here — not always from them yet, but from yourself. You learn to override your own instincts in service of the hope.

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If something feels off — trust it.

In a healthy relationship, the early stages don't require you to constantly override your instincts. They don't leave you with a quiet unease you keep talking yourself out of.

The beginning of a real relationship feels good in a way that doesn't require constant justification.

If you're working hard to convince yourself that what you're in is okay — pay attention to that work. Pay attention to what it's costing you.

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The beginning wasn't a lie that became the truth. It was a performance that became harder to maintain.

You got in because you were human. Because you wanted connection. Because you saw potential. Because you were wired to believe in people.

None of those things are wrong. They're just what got aimed at the wrong person.

Chapter THREE

THE MECHANISM

Let me tell you what narcissism actually is. Not the watered-down version. Not the pop culture definition. The real thing — because until you understand what you're actually dealing with, none of the rest of this makes sense.

Most people hear the word narcissist and picture someone who is full of themselves. Arrogant. Self-absorbed. Someone who loves themselves too much.

That's not what this is.

What narcissism actually is — at its core — is the absence of genuine empathy. Not reduced empathy. Not selective empathy. A fundamental inability to feel what another person

feels in a way that drives genuine behavioral change toward that person.

That one sentence — once you truly understand it — explains everything. Every confusing moment. Every conversation that went nowhere. Every time you showed them clearly what they were doing and they still didn't change.

All of it.

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Here's what empathy actually means for people like us.

When someone we care about is hurting — we feel it. Not as information. As experience. Their pain lands in us and changes something. It makes us want to fix it, soothe it, repair whatever caused it.

When we hurt someone — even unintentionally — we feel the impact of that too. There's an internal response that makes us

want to correct our behavior. Not because someone told us to. Because we feel the weight of having caused harm.

That internal guidance system is what drives most of our behavior without us even thinking about it.

Now imagine functioning without that.

Not choosing not to use it. Actually not having access to it in the way that drives genuine behavioral change.

That's what we're dealing with.

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Here's something important that most people get wrong about narcissism — and understanding it correctly is what finally gave me the clarity to stop the loop I was stuck in.

Most narcissists don't consciously know what they are or what they're doing.

Narcissism itself is a defense mechanism. It develops from a combination of factors — genetics and early childhood

experiences where a significant loss of control occurred. The mind builds this defense to protect itself from that original wound. And from that point forward the behaviors that come with it — the lying, the rewriting of events, the projection, the chaos — happen automatically. The narcissist's mind rewrites reality in real time without them choosing to do it.

They are not sitting in a room plotting against you. For the vast majority of narcissists the behavior is instinctive — driven by something deeply ingrained that they don't recognize or examine in themselves.

This matters for two specific reasons.

First — it explains why explaining yourself never worked. You were using emotional reasoning with someone whose system doesn't process emotion the way you do. You were trying to create accountability in someone who genuinely doesn't experience their behavior as wrong. That's not a gap that better words can bridge.

Second — it explains why your empathy couldn't fix it. You can feel everything deeply. You can love fully and consistently. But empathy flowing toward someone who can't receive it the same way doesn't change them. It just depletes you.

None of this is an excuse. The damage was real. What happened to you was wrong. Understanding why someone causes harm doesn't make the harm acceptable or mean they bear no responsibility.

But understanding the mechanism closes the loop that kept so many of us searching — believing that if we just explained it better, loved harder, tried differently — something would finally change.

It wouldn't have. Not because of anything you failed to do. Because of the mechanism.

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I spent three months in near isolation reading everything I could find about narcissism. Consuming material constantly —

trying to make sense of something that kept making no sense to me.

And here's what kept stopping me: How do they not get it.

I would read something that explained the behavior perfectly. I would recognize it completely. And then I would think — but if I can see it this clearly, why can't they? If I can explain it this specifically, why doesn't understanding it change anything?

What I eventually understood — and what I want to save you months of searching to find — is this:

You cannot reach someone through emotional appeal when the emotional pathway you're appealing to functions differently in them than it does in you.

It's not that they hear you and choose not to care. It's that the internal experience of hearing you doesn't land the same way for them.

Their perception of reality is genuinely different from yours.

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Think about how you see the world.

You walk into a room and you immediately sense the emotional atmosphere. You pick up on tension before anyone speaks. You feel other people's moods as if they're partially your own.

Now imagine walking into that same room and filtering everything — every interaction, every relationship, every conversation — entirely through the question of control. Who has it. Whether they have enough of it. Whether something is threatening it. How to restore it if it's been compromised.

Not consciously. Not deliberately. Just automatically.

That's a fundamentally different way of processing reality. And because those two lenses are so incompatible — because we're speaking from emotional experience and they're processing everything through an automatic need for control — the

conversation we keep trying to have is happening across a gap that words cannot bridge.

This is why you can present clear evidence of what happened and they will still find a way to rewrite it. Their internal system needs to maintain a version of reality that protects them — and that system operates faster than any evidence you can present.

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Now I need to address the hardest thing in this entire book.

They never loved you. Not the way you loved them.

I know how that lands. I know what it costs to read it. Because you felt love from them — real, tangible, overwhelming love in moments. And being told that wasn't real feels like losing it all over again.

But I'm not going to soften this because I think you deserve the truth more than you deserve comfort that keeps you confused.

Narcissists can observe love. They watch how people who genuinely feel it behave and they learn to replicate it. Sometimes with remarkable precision.

What they cannot replicate is the internal experience that drives those behaviors in people with full empathy. The caring that continues even when it's inconvenient. The love that considers someone else's wellbeing independent of what that person is providing.

So what you experienced was real in the sense that it was actually happening. Real attention. Real warmth. Real moments of connection.

What wasn't real was the motivation underneath it — and the sustainability of it once the motivation changed.

This is not your fault. You responded to what was presented to you. And what was presented was designed specifically to feel like the real thing.

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You were not confused because you were foolish. You were confused because you were trying to apply an emotionally intelligent framework to a dynamic that doesn't operate through emotional intelligence.

You loved them with everything you had. That love was real. That love was yours. And it deserved to be matched.

It wasn't matched — not because you weren't enough, but because the person you aimed it at didn't have the capacity to match it.

That is not your failure. That is the most important thing I could tell you.

Chapter FOUR

WHAT IT DOES TO YOU

I want to talk about your body for a moment.

Not your thoughts. Not your decisions. Not the conversations you replayed or the evidence you gathered or the explanations you tried.

Your body.

Because before your mind fully understood what was happening — before you had the language for any of it — your body already knew.

It knew in the tension that arrived before you even heard their car pull up. In the way your shoulders moved toward your ears when their mood shifted. In the stomach that dropped when your phone lit up with their name.

Your nervous system was keeping score long before you were.

And by the time you started to understand what you were in — by the time the pattern became undeniable — your body had already been living in a state of chronic alert for months. Sometimes years.

That's not weakness. That's what prolonged exposure to an unpredictable environment does to a human nervous system. Biology doesn't have exceptions for strong people.

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You're tense around them. Your body is physically different in their presence than it is anywhere else. You monitor their energy before you speak. You brace.

And yet when they leave — when the source of the tension is actually gone — you don't feel relief the way you'd expect to.

You feel something closer to panic.

You wonder where they are. What they're doing. You pick up your phone and put it down. You tell yourself you're not going to text. You go back and forth — text, don't text — sometimes for hours.

And you look at yourself in the middle of all of this and think — what is wrong with me.

I couldn't stand to be around this person. And now that they're gone I can't function.

I know that thought. I lived that thought.

I would sit there and ask myself — why do you even care about this person right now. I don't even like them. I don't like what they do. So why does the thought of losing them make me feel like I can't breathe. You know better than this.

There is nothing wrong with you. There is something very specific happening to your nervous system that has a name and an explanation. And once you understand it, the shame of that experience starts to lift.

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What's happening is called a trauma bond.

It sounds clinical. It doesn't feel clinical. It feels like love — the most intense, consuming, impossible-to-explain love you've ever experienced. It feels like the only person who can make you feel okay is the same person who keeps making you feel terrible.

When a relationship cycles between warmth and withdrawal — between closeness and distance, between affection and punishment — your nervous system learns to attach to the relief of the warmth returning rather than to consistent love.

The withdrawal creates anxiety. The return resolves it. And that cycle — anxiety, then relief — creates a bond stronger than anything consistent affection could produce.

Because unpredictable rewards create stronger attachment than predictable ones.

A relationship that cycles between warm and cold creates a pull that feels impossible to break. Your brain becomes wired to wait for the next moment of warmth. To stay available for it.

That's not love. That's conditioning.

And the most painful part is that it feels exactly like love from the inside.

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There's something else I did that I've never heard anyone talk about honestly.

I tested them.

Not because I didn't know the answer. I already knew the answer. I tested them because some part of me needed to see it confirmed — needed to watch them show me exactly who they were one more time — even though I knew what was coming.

And they would respond exactly the way I knew they would.

And then I would sit there afterward feeling completely stupid.

Why did I just do that. I knew that was going to happen.

But I did it again. Because the loop wasn't logical. It was compulsive.

And then they would come back. And even after confirming exactly what I already knew — I would take them back.

The best way I know how to describe what that felt like is this — it was like an addiction.

Not because I was weak. Not because I had no self-respect. But because the withdrawal from the cycle felt worse than staying in it. Because some part of my nervous system had learned that the relief of them coming back — even temporarily, even knowing nothing had changed — was the only thing that made the anxiety stop.

And as soon as they would come back I would think — God that was so stupid. You knew exactly what was going to happen. And I'd sit there in tears, angry at myself, saying why did you do that. You knew better.

But knowing better and being able to act on what you know are two completely different things when your nervous system has been trained the way mine had been trained.

That's what a trauma bond actually feels like from the inside.

Not love exactly. More like need. A need so deep and so physical that logic couldn't reach it.

You weren't stupid. You were bonded — chemically, neurologically, in a way that bypassed your intelligence and your self-awareness and went straight to the most primal part of your brain.

And brains don't reason their way out of that easily.

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There's another layer to what this relationship does to you that goes beyond the nervous system.

It reaches into your sense of reality itself.

Narcissists gaslight — they rewrite events, deny what you experienced, deliver their version of reality with such certainty that your own accurate memory starts to feel unreliable. Over time that doesn't just make you doubt specific events. It makes you doubt your own mind as a reliable instrument.

I would think — yes, this is exactly it. And then immediately — but what if I'm wrong. What if I'm the problem.

That loop — clarity, doubt, confirmation, doubt — is not you being indecisive. It's the direct result of spending extended time in a relationship that systematically interfered with your ability to trust your own perception.

Your mind was not broken. It was being interfered with.

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For many people in these dynamics the relationship doesn't just create new wounds. It reopens old ones.

When you grow up in an environment where love was conditional, where chaos was normal, where you learned early that your needs came second — you carry that into adulthood. Not consciously. In your nervous system.

A narcissistic relationship activates all of that. The same feelings you had as a child — the desperate need to be loved, the fear of abandonment, the confusion of loving someone who hurts you — come rushing back.

And suddenly you're not just dealing with the relationship in front of you. You're dealing with everything the current situation is echoing from before it.

That's an enormous amount to carry.

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Everything described in these pages — the physical tension, the trauma bond, the testing, the taking them back, the tears, the self-blame, the reality distortion, the childhood wounds surfacing — none of it happened because you were weak.

It happened because you were human. Because you were in something specifically designed to produce exactly these effects in a person like you.

And the fact that you're still here — still searching for understanding, still trying to make sense of it, still looking for a way through — is not evidence that something is wrong with you.

It's evidence that you haven't given up on yourself.

That matters more than you know.

Chapter FIVE

WHEN THE SYSTEM FAILS YOU

There's something nobody prepares you for when you finally decide to get out.

You do everything right. You document everything. You call the right people. You file the reports. You show up with the evidence. You follow every step you were told to follow.

And nothing happens.

This chapter is for everyone who has lived that. Because the failure of the systems designed to protect you is its own category of trauma — and it doesn't get talked about honestly enough.

Most people assume that if things are bad enough — if there is real danger, real evidence, real documentation — the system

will respond. That's what it's there for. That's what we're taught to believe.

What nobody tells you is that the system has gaps. Large ones. And certain situations fall directly into those gaps in ways that leave survivors completely exposed while doing everything right.

I know because I lived it.

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When I finally reached the point of trying to get out I did what you're supposed to do.

I documented everything. I called when incidents happened. I filed reports. I showed footage. I emailed everyone I could think of — law enforcement, probation officers, victim advocates, anyone with any authority over the situation. I had evidence that most people would consider irrefutable — video of property being destroyed, of break-ins, of violations happening in real time. At one point law enforcement brought

canine units and drones to my property trying to locate him after he broke in and assaulted me.

And I was dismissed. Repeatedly. Consistently. By the people whose job it was to help me.

Jurisdictional issues. Cases passed between offices. Reports filed and quietly dismissed without explanation. Months of documentation that went nowhere. The cycle of reporting and being sent home with nothing — over and over — until I understood that the help I needed wasn't coming from the channels that were supposed to provide it.

That realization — that you are on your own — is one of the most destabilizing things a person can experience.

Because up until that point there was a belief that if things got bad enough there was somewhere to turn. Some system. Some authority. Some mechanism that existed to stop what was happening.

When that belief is removed — when you discover through repeated experience that the system isn't going to act — something fundamental shifts.

You stop looking outward for rescue. And you start making calculations about survival.

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Those survival calculations are something I want to name directly because they're rarely discussed honestly.

When you're in a dangerous situation with no institutional support, you start making decisions that look confusing from the outside but make complete sense from where you're standing.

You cave. Not because you want to. Because caving feels safer than the alternative.

There were moments when I had to weigh the danger of someone's presence against the reality that calling for help

hadn't worked before. When I had to decide whether to open the door or stay hidden in my room with the lights off. When a protection order existed on paper but offered nothing in practice because the people charged with enforcing it weren't going to act.

In those moments the only rational response was to manage the situation the best way I could. Even when the best way available was deeply imperfect.

That's not weakness. That's intelligence operating under impossible conditions.

Survival decisions made under impossible conditions are not moral failures. They are evidence of how extreme the situation actually was.

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There's a specific way the system's failure compounds the trauma bond.

Because leaving requires believing that you'll be okay on the other side. That there's safety available. That the exit is survivable.

When the system has demonstrated repeatedly that it won't protect you — when you've called for help and been sent home, when you've shown the evidence and been dismissed — the belief that the exit is safe becomes very hard to maintain.

And so you stay. Not because you want to. Not because you love them anymore. But because the alternative feels more dangerous than the situation you're already managing.

That's not a personal failure. That's a rational response to an irrational situation.

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I also want to talk about the specific grief that comes from being failed by institutions you were taught to trust.

Before all of this happened I believed that if you did the right things the system would work. That belief felt like safety.

When that belief gets dismantled through direct personal experience — it changes something fundamental in how you relate to the world. To authority. To the idea that doing the right thing produces the right outcome.

That loss deserves to be named. As a real wound that sits alongside everything else and requires its own acknowledgment and healing.

The relationship hurt you. The system's failure to stop it hurt you in a different and specific way.

Both are real. Both deserve space.

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I want to address something directly for the person reading this who is currently in a situation where the system has failed them.

First — you are not alone. This happens more than anyone publicly acknowledges.

Second — documenting everything still matters even when it feels pointless. Because circumstances change. Keep the records. Keep the evidence. Even when it feels like nobody is listening.

Third — your safety is the only priority. Not justice. Not accountability right now. Your physical safety first. Everything else can be addressed when you're in a position to address it.

And fourth — the way out often doesn't look like what you imagined. More often it's a change in circumstances. A different jurisdiction. A crack in the situation that finally creates an opening.

When that opening comes — take it. Even if it's not the justice you deserved. Take the opening and get to safety.

Everything else comes after that.

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There's something that comes from surviving that specific experience — of being on your own, without institutional support, in a dangerous situation — that I want to name before we close this chapter.

It produces a kind of strength that doesn't come from anywhere else.

The kind that comes from discovering that you can survive something that should have broken you. That you can keep functioning when all the external supports you expected have been removed.

That strength is real. And it belongs entirely to you.

Chapter SIX

HATING THEM AND MISSING THEM

Nobody talks about this part honestly.

The part where you hate them — genuinely, completely, with full clarity about who they are and what they've done — and you miss them at the same time.

Not the person they actually were. The person you believed they could be. The version of them from the beginning. The warmth that felt real even if it wasn't sustained.

That grief — mourning someone who never fully existed — is one of the most confusing and underacknowledged parts of leaving a narcissistic relationship.

Because you can't explain it to people who haven't lived it. You try to tell someone you miss them and they look at you like you've lost your mind. After everything they did. You miss that?

And you find yourself unable to explain that it's not about what they did. It's about what you believed was possible. The future you saw. The version of love you thought you'd finally found.

That's what you're grieving. And it's real. Even if what you were grieving never fully was.

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You're not just grieving one thing. You're grieving multiple things at once.

You're grieving the relationship as it was. The real moments, the real connection, the real love you brought to it even if they couldn't match it.

You're grieving the relationship as it could have been. The version you worked toward for months or years. The potential you saw that kept you there long after the evidence said you should leave.

You're grieving the version of yourself that existed before. The person you were before the relationship required you to become someone smaller. Before the confidence eroded. Before the self-doubt took up permanent residence.

And you're grieving the time. The months or years that went into something that couldn't give back what you put in.

That's a lot of grief to carry at once. And it doesn't resolve in a straight line.

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I want to talk about something that doesn't get discussed enough — the grief of losing yourself.

Not just grieving them or what the relationship could have been. Grieving who you were before.

I remember looking in the mirror during the worst of it and not recognizing myself. Not physically. Inside. I had become someone who walked around with the lights off in her own home. Someone who had stopped trusting her own instincts so completely that she couldn't make simple decisions without second-guessing them.

That wasn't me. I knew it wasn't me. And I was so angry at myself for having become her.

But here's what I want you to understand about that anger — it was misplaced. You didn't choose to lose yourself. You were gradually required to become smaller by a dynamic specifically designed to reduce you.

And here's what I know now that I didn't know then: losing yourself for a while isn't the same as losing yourself permanently.

She was still there. Under all of it. Quieter. More uncertain. But there.

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I want to tell you something about my daughter.

She had been through her own versions of this — difficult relationships that had kept her in the same kinds of loops. And I remember, before I went through what I went through, saying things to her that I am not proud of.

If it were me I would never let that happen. I don't understand why you don't just leave.

I said those things because I genuinely didn't understand. Because from the outside it looks like a choice. A simple one. One that a strong person would just make.

And then I lived it.

I remember sitting on my bed, my daughter beside me, deep in the middle of my own version of everything I had never

understood. And I looked at her and I said — I am so sorry. I am so sorry I ever questioned why you stayed. I am a strong person and I thought I would never let anyone do that to me. And here I am. And now I understand.

She looked at me and she said — Mom, I forgive you. And then she said something I will carry with me for the rest of my life. She said — Mom, we were there for each other. We both needed each other at the same time.

If you've ever judged someone for staying — I'm asking you gently to reconsider. Not because they made the right choice. Because they were doing the only thing their nervous system knew how to do at the time.

And if you've been judged for staying — you don't owe anyone an explanation for what your nervous system did to survive.

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There's also the specific confusion of hating someone you still have feelings for.

I know what it's like to look at someone and feel contempt — real, clear contempt — and in the same moment feel the pull of the bond that the relationship created.

Both of those things were true at the same time.

The answer is that the bond and the clarity are two separate things operating simultaneously.

Your clarity about who they are is accurate. And the bond — the attachment your nervous system formed during the cycles of warmth and withdrawal — doesn't disappear because your mind caught up to the truth. It fades over time with distance. But it doesn't switch off the moment you decide it should.

Those two things coexist for a while. And that is not evidence that you're confused about who they are.

It's evidence that you're human.

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He took away my sense of self for a while. He took my self-esteem for a while. He took my peace for a while.

But he never took my heart and my soul. And no one ever will.

That's the thing about people like us. Our greatest strength is also the thing that makes this so hard. But it's also the thing that survives it.

Give yourself the grace to grieve what you lost — even the parts that were never fully real.

And then — when you're ready — begin the work of coming back to yourself.

That's what the next chapter is about.

Chapter SEVEN

FINDING YOUR WAY BACK

I want to tell you what getting out actually looked like for me.

Not the dramatic version. Not the clean break with a clear moment of decision and a triumphant exit. The real version.

I sold my business. I sold my house. I packed what mattered and I moved to a state where I knew almost no one. I walked away from family. I walked away from community. I walked away from everything familiar because everything familiar had become part of a situation I couldn't survive staying in.

I arrived in a new place not knowing if I was going to have electricity. Knowing only that I had a roof and that the roof was in a place where I could finally breathe.

That was the beginning of finding my way back.

Not a triumphant moment. A quiet one. A desperate one. A this is the only option left and I'm taking it one.

But it was mine. And that mattered more than anything else.

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Here's what I want you to understand about recovery from narcissistic abuse.

It is not linear. It does not follow a schedule. It does not look like the before and after pictures you see online.

It looks like a Tuesday where you feel genuinely okay for the first time in months. And then a Wednesday where you're back in the grief and you can't explain why. And then a slow accumulation of more Tuesdays. Until one day you realize the okay ones are outnumbering the hard ones and you can't pinpoint exactly when that shifted.

That's what real recovery looks like. Quiet. Uneven. Happening in the margins of ordinary days.

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There are specific signs that you're coming back to yourself that I want to name.

The first is that you start having opinions again. Not careful, filtered opinions calibrated for someone else's reaction. Real ones. Unedited ones.

The second is that you start noticing things that don't feel right — and trusting that noticing without requiring yourself to justify it to anyone.

The third is that you start choosing yourself. Not dramatically. In small daily moments.

The situation that doesn't feel right and you walk away from it without explanation. The moment where your own peace matters more than someone else's comfort and you act accordingly.

Those small choices accumulate. And over time they rebuild the self-trust that the relationship spent so long dismantling.

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I also want to talk about learning to be alone. And finding out that alone isn't the same as lonely.

I rebuilt my life largely by myself. New state. New start. And what I discovered in that aloneness — once the initial fear of it settled — was something I hadn't expected.

Myself.

The version of me that existed before the relationship required me to be something smaller. The person I was before someone else's needs and moods and chaos became the center of my daily existence.

She was still there. Quieter than she used to be. A little uncertain. But there.

You don't need a relationship to be whole. You need to be whole in order to have a healthy relationship. And wholeness is only available on the other side of doing the work.

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Here's what I know about recovery that I wish someone had told me earlier.

You have to learn to be a little bit selfish to become truly selfless.

Not selfish in the way that was modeled for you in the narcissistic relationship. Selfish in the sense that your needs matter. Your peace matters. Your sense of safety and wellbeing matter enough to protect — even when protecting them disappoints someone or requires you to walk away from something that isn't serving you.

You cannot pour endlessly from a container that never gets refilled. Refilling it — genuinely prioritizing your own wellbeing, your own peace, your own healing — is not selfish in any negative sense of that word.

It's survival. And eventually, it's the foundation of everything good that comes next.

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The right people — the ones who deserve access to you — will not make you question yourself. They will not require you to shrink. They will not make you feel like needing basic respect is asking for too much.

You will know the right people because being around them feels like exhaling. Like you can be exactly who you are and that's not only acceptable — it's welcomed.

And the ones who don't make you feel that way — you can simply choose yourself. Walk away. And trust that the clarity you've worked so hard to develop is telling you something worth listening to.

That is what recovery ultimately looks like.

Not the absence of pain. Not becoming someone who never trusted the wrong person again.

Becoming someone who trusts themselves so completely that the wrong people can't get far enough in to cause the same damage again.

That's available to you. I'm proof of it.

Chapter EIGHT

DIFFERENT FACE. SAME PATTERN.

There's something that doesn't get talked about honestly enough in conversations about narcissistic abuse.

Most people who end up in one of these relationships have been in something like it before.

Not identical. Not as extreme. Not something they would have called narcissistic abuse at the time — because they didn't have that language yet. But something that felt off. Something that they eventually got out of without fully understanding what it was.

And then they met someone new. And it happened again.

This chapter is about that experience. About going through the pattern twice — with two different people who looked completely different on the surface — and not recognizing the second one until you were already deep inside it.

Because the pattern doesn't announce itself. It adapts. It shows up differently depending on who you are at that moment in your life, what you need, what you're looking for.

I know this because I lived it. Twice.

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The first time I went through something like this, I didn't have a name for it.

I was young. I thought I understood what a narcissist was — someone arrogant, full of themselves. That was the pop culture definition and it was all I had.

What I was actually living didn't look like that definition. So I didn't call it that. I just knew something was wrong.

It was his way or no way. He went silent when he was angry and let the atmosphere fill with tension that nobody ever named out loud. He could get physical sometimes. He cheated. He lied and turned conversations around so that I was always somehow the problem.

I got out eventually. Not with full understanding of what I'd been in. Just with the bone-deep knowledge that I couldn't stay.

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Years later he came back into my life.

He presented himself as someone who had changed. Who had been through difficulty. Who finally knew what he wanted.

I should have paid attention to how he talked about the people in his past. Every story had the same shape — he was always the wronged party, always the one who had been misunderstood. There were no stories where he took responsibility.

A history with no accountability in it is a preview of what accountability will look like with you.

But I didn't know that then. The love bombing came. The mirroring came. The sense of being finally chosen by someone who really saw me.

And I went in. Fully. Because I was infatuated with who I believed he was.

This time things went further. I was running my own business — something I had built on my own. He moved into my life and I carried everything. My business. My property. My home. He would tell me how to run the business I had built and operated for years while contributing little himself.

It was easier to let him talk than to argue. And somewhere in that constant accommodation I lost the thread of my own voice.

A year in he cheated on me. With the same woman he had cheated on me with years before, when we were young.

The same person. Years later. As if the intervening time hadn't happened.

That was the moment I knew something was deeply and fundamentally wrong. Not just with the relationship. With the pattern itself.

But even then I stayed longer than I should have. Because the bond was real even when the relationship wasn't.

I eventually got out. Still without the complete framework. Still without the language that would have named what I had been in.

And then came the relationship that would finally break everything open.

The one so extreme, so undeniable, so far beyond anything I could explain away — that I had no choice but to go looking for answers. To spend three months consuming everything I could find. To finally understand not just what was happening

in front of me but what had been happening for years before that.

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After I went through that — after I finally had the language and the framework for what narcissism actually is — I looked back at the first relationship.

And everything clicked.

The entitlement. The silence as punishment. The turning conversations around. The cheating with the same person twice. The way I was never quite enough no matter how much I gave.

I hadn't been young and foolish the first time. I hadn't been infatuated for no reason. I had been in the same pattern — a less extreme version of it — and I hadn't had the framework to name it.

The more extreme relationship gave me that framework. As painful as that is to say.

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At some point in the middle of all of it I threw my hands up.

Not in defeat. In surrender to the truth.

I said — I give. I surrender. What is it that you're trying to teach me. Tell me what I need to learn.

And the answer that eventually came wasn't what I expected.

It wasn't that I was broken. It wasn't that I had done something wrong.

It was that I had been choosing the pattern without being able to see it. Not the person — the pattern. The same dynamic wearing different faces. The same mechanism operating through different personalities.

And the lesson wasn't to stop trusting people. It wasn't to close off or become less of who I was.

The lesson was to learn what the pattern looks like before it shows its face fully. To trust my nervous system's early warnings. To stop explaining away the small things that register before everything becomes undeniable.

The lesson was to choose myself before the pattern chose me.

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If you've been in something like this before and then found yourself in something similar again — please hear this:

That is not evidence that something is wrong with you.

It is evidence that the pattern is sophisticated enough to adapt to whoever you are. To present itself in the form you're most likely to respond to at that specific moment in your life.

You weren't fooled because you were weak. You were targeted again because the pattern recognized what worked before and arrived wearing a different face.

The way out is to become someone who reads the pattern earlier. Who trusts the quiet unease before it becomes undeniable evidence. Who pauses at the love bombing and the mirroring long enough to ask honest questions.

You don't have to stop being who you are to protect yourself.

You just have to learn to see the pattern before it sees you.

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I am genuinely grateful for both of those relationships now. Not because of what they did to me. Because of what they finally taught me.

They taught me who I am. They taught me what I'm capable of surviving. They taught me that my heart is mine and no one gets to take it — not permanently, not if I refuse to let them.

They opened my eyes to something I might never have fully understood any other way.

And they brought me here — to peace, to clarity, to a version of myself that I trust completely.

That's not a small thing.

That's everything.

Chapter NINE

WHAT I KNOW NOW

I want to close this book the way I'd close a conversation with someone I genuinely care about.

Not with a list. Not with steps. Not with clinical advice that sounds good but doesn't touch the actual place you're hurting.

Just with the truth. The things I know now that I wish someone had told me when I was sitting in a room by myself in the dark trying to figure out how I was going to survive what I was in.

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The first thing I know now is that nothing that happened to you happened because you were too much.

You were not too emotional. You were not too sensitive. You were not too needy or too intense or too loving or too anything.

You were exactly who you were supposed to be — placed in a dynamic specifically designed to make those qualities feel like liabilities.

They are not liabilities. They are the things that make you capable of genuine love, genuine connection, genuine presence with another person. They got aimed at someone who used them instead of honoring them.

That is not a flaw in you. That is a failure on their part. And those are not the same thing.

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The second thing I know now is that healing is not about becoming harder.

I hear this sometimes — that the lesson of going through something like this is to stop trusting people. To close off. To protect yourself by becoming less available, less open, less willing to love fully.

That's not healing. That's armor. And armor keeps out the bad and the good equally.

Real healing is about becoming more discerning. Not less loving. More selective about where the love goes.

You don't need to stop being an empath. You don't need to stop feeling deeply.

You need to become someone who cares so much about their own peace and wellbeing that they choose carefully who gets access to the full version of themselves.

That's not hardness. That's wisdom.



The third thing I know now is that the right people will not make you question yourself.

The right person does not make you feel like needing basic respect is asking too much. They don't make you feel like you have to earn the warmth. They don't create an atmosphere where you're constantly scanning for the shift in mood.

You will know the right people because being around them feels like exhaling. Like you can be exactly who you are and that's not only acceptable — it's welcomed.

Clarity is always the beginning of something better.

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The fourth thing I know now is that you don't owe anyone an explanation for choosing yourself.

When something doesn't feel right — I walk away. Without a speech. Without a detailed explanation. Without requiring myself to convince anyone that my instincts are valid.

My instincts are valid. Yours are too.

You can simply choose yourself. Quietly. Completely. Without apology.

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The fifth thing I know now is that peace is real and it's waiting for you.

I live in genuine peace now. Not the performance of peace. Not the management of chaos.

Actual peace. The kind where I wake up and the first feeling isn't dread. Where I move through my days without scanning anyone's energy. Where I trust what I feel and act on what I know.

That's available to you too.

Not immediately. Not without the work. But it's real and it's on the other side of this and it is so worth everything it costs to get there.

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Before I close I want to say one more thing.

I still have a huge heart. I don't look at men as bad people. I don't look at women as bad people. I don't carry my past into every new room I walk into.

Hurt people hurt people. Healed people love differently.

And there is real love on the other side of this — good people, genuine connection, a life that feels nothing like what you survived. Don't close your heart because of what one or two people did with it. Just pay attention to the patterns. Pay attention to your instincts. Pay attention to how your body feels in someone's presence.

The life waiting for you on the other side is beautiful. And there are good people in it.

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Ignite your purpose. Fuel your soul.

You survived something that should have broken you. You're reading this book — which means some part of you is still looking for the way through. Still believing that clarity is possible. Still refusing to accept that what you've been living is all there is.

That part of you is right.

There is more. There is better. There is a version of your life where you are the authority on your own experience and nobody gets to take that from you again.

Go find it.

I'll be here cheering you on.

— Melissa Bilbruck
Torch & Soul

A NOTE FROM THE AUTHOR

If this book found you at the right moment — I'm glad.

If you're still in it, please reach out to the National Domestic Violence Hotline at 1-800-799-7233 (thehotline.org) or text START to 88788. You don't have to have it all figured out to deserve support.

Follow along at Torch & Soul for daily content, resources, and community:

TikTok, Instagram, Facebook, YouTube: @torchandsoul
Website: torchandsoul.com
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You are not alone.

— *Melissa*