

A CALL TO THE WOMEN'S CENTER

Steven D. Hales

'Hello, this is the Women's Center, may I help you?'

'Yeah, uh, hi. I don't really know if I should be calling you, but a friend of mine told me to call. She thought it was a good idea.'

'Sure. Let me ask before we go on – are you in a safe place to talk? Are you in any immediate danger?'

'I think I can talk. I dunno, I guess I'm not sure. I mean, I don't think he's here right now, but he's always keeping an eye on me. I never really know if he's watching or not. I don't think I'm in immediate danger.'

'Is there someplace you can go to talk where you would feel safer?'

'No, not really. I can't leave the house without him knowing about it. He follows me.'

'Why does he do that?'

'He says he has to watch over me. I shouldn't complain about it; that's one of my problems, I'm just not grateful enough. I know he really loves me.'

'He loves you so much that he won't let you out of his sight?'

'I know that sounds bad, the way you put it, but yes. He doesn't mean anything bad by it.'

'Have you thought about whether this is the right way to express love? If he is constantly keeping tabs on you and checking up on you, maybe it's really more about control than love. What about finances? Do you have your own money?'

'I sort of do. But it's not a lot. He's really in charge of all the money stuff. That's OK, though, I'd just squander it, anyway, it's better that he's in charge. It's fine.'

'It sounds like he's very controlling and doesn't really trust you. Is that right?'

'I hear what you're saying, but he has to look out for me. He's so much smarter than I am. He always knows what the right thing to do is.'

'Is that what he tells you?'

'Yes, but it's true. He's really smart. None of my accomplishments can stack up to what he's done.'

'Just because he's done some things doesn't mean that you're worthless, or your achievements don't count.'

'I guess so. I just always feel like I never measure up, that's all. But I'm lucky to have him in my life, I really am. I need him to take care of me – he's always telling me that I couldn't make it on my own. It's true too.'

'I bet you're a stronger person than you think you are. Look, we've helped out lots of people who have been in terrible situations, and they have discovered, once they've gotten free, that they are much stronger, more resilient, than they ever thought they were.'

'Maybe. I just feel so... trapped. And I feel guilty for even saying it. I'm scared to say it.'

'Has he hurt you?'

'No, never.'

'Has he ever threatened you, or destroyed your things?'

'No, he's never destroyed anything of mine. But I know he was in another relationship before me, and he got so angry with his ex that he burned down the house. I'm afraid of doing something wrong, like I'm always walking on eggshells.'

'Has he threatened you?'

[Pause, then whispering] 'Yes. He's told me that if I don't do what he says he'll kill me. It's my fault though. I try to be good, but I... I don't know... he's been under a lot of stress lately. He only tells me what to do because he loves me so much.'

'OK, was this recent? Or have these threats been going on a long time?'

'Ever since we've been together, I guess.'

'Are there weapons in your home? Guns?'

'No, not that I know about. But he doesn't need them. Everyone's afraid of him. He's really big. I even think [whispering again] that he might have drowned somebody once.'

'Look, we should talk about your options. Do you have a trusted friend you could stay with? Or relatives? Is there a minister who could help you out?'

'My minister is the last person I could talk to! He's best friends with you-know-who.'

'All right, then. We should think of a safety plan for you. There's too many warning signs here – I'm worried about your safety. Your partner is in charge of all the finances, belittles your intelligence, is jealous and controlling, and watches your every move. You know he's been violent with others and he's threatened you too. Have you thought about a PFA?'

'What do you mean?'

'A protection from abuse order. The court can order one and he won't be able to go near you.'

'No. No way.'

'The police will enforce it. He'll go to jail if he violates the order.'

'No, you don't understand. He has lots of influence, everyone loves him and thinks he's wonderful. The police won't do a thing. Nobody will lift a finger against him. You just don't know.'

'Hey, I know you're scared. But we've given many people the tools they need to get out of abusive relationships, and they are on their own, or in new, healthy relationships. I know it's hard to see past this, but you have a better future ahead of you. The Women's Center can help. There's a secure shelter you can go to, and we won't tell him where you are. I promise.'

'And... [crying]... there's something else too. The worst thing. I haven't even told you. I have breast cancer. And he won't even help me, he says he could cure me, that he's done that for other women, but he won't help me. He won't do anything, and I've begged him to.'

'He's an oncologist and he won't help somebody he claims to love?'

'Yes, I guess, I don't know... I guess he's an oncologist. He's really secretive about what he does. But he could do something to help me and he won't. I'm so scared and I don't know what else to do.'

'Have you talked to him about this? What does he say?'

'That's just it, I try talking to him, but he gives me the silent treatment. I ask him for help and it's like I'm not even there.'

[deep breath] 'OK, look, we have a medical advocate at the medical center the next town over. I can get you in to see someone. Are you willing to leave? The first thing we have to do is figure out how to get you out safely, without him knowing. That's step one.'

'No, no, you don't get it. It won't work, nothing will work.'

'All right. I understand that you're upset and frightened. These are normal feelings. I want to help – let's think this through. You said that everyone knows him and he has a lot of influence. Maybe if you told me his name I could try to come up with something.'

[pause] 'It's God.'

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