Julia and Adam were in a relationship for three years, during which time they had a child who was just under 12 months old at separation. They both completed secondary education and apprenticeships in different fields. Julia was employed until the child was born and is now the primary carer and in receipt of a Centrelink sole parent pension. Julia and the child live with Julia’s mother. Adam is employed and required to travel often as part of his work. They have an informal arrangement where Adam has supervised contact in a public location with the child (and Julia present) for a couple of hours one day a week, or as his work permits; Julia has been happy to accommodate his changing schedule. However when Adam threatened to apply for residence of the child, Julia began investigating Family Law orders. Adam is a frequent user of cannabis, and suffers from memory loss, depression and mood disorders as a result of a brain injury he received several years ago in a car accident. While Julia doesn’t believe Adam would do anything intentionally to harm the child, she has observed that his attention span is limited, he forgets to watch the child, he smokes in the child’s presence and leaves dangerous items within reach. Julia is also concerned about the unhealthy influence of Adam’s family. Julia is consulting her doctor about the anxiety she is experiencing from her abusive relationship with Adam.

Since Adam’s brain injury, his mother has held power of attorney over all of his affairs and otherwise dominated his recovery, rehabilitation and decision making. Julia believes that this loss of control over his life led Adam to assert control over Julia. She was also made to feel responsible for Adam’s emotional care, even though she felt that the brain injury was used as a ready excuse for Adam’s abusive and dysfunctional behaviour. He objected to her working in a male-dominated industry, she wasn’t allowed to continue dancing, and restricted her from spending time with her family and friends. He threatened to turn up at Julia’s workplace and make a scene so she would lose her job. During her pregnancy, they moved into and renovated a house Adam had inherited from his deceased father. Adam would dictate who could visit and when. At least every second week, and increasingly so through the pregnancy and after the child was born, Adam would rage out of control, and throw Julia’s belongings out the front of the house and tell her to leave. By this stage, Julia had discovered that Adam also had a serious drug problem, and became very concerned about the potential effects on a newborn. Once Julia stopped work to have the baby, Adam would regularly tell her that he was the only one working, and she needed to shut up and do as she was told. Julia would respond by saying that she was entitled to her own opinion regardless of whether agreed, but realised that there were times that this would produce an explosive reaction in Adam involving his screaming in her face and standing on her feet so she was unable to move. Adam gave Julia money only to buy groceries and nappies, and refused to pay for new clothes for Julia who had lost a considerable amount of weight due to stress. They had a joint account, but Adam would withdraw any available money denying Julia access to funds; he would mostly spend the money on cannabis. Julia’s mother would often pay for items Julia and the child needed. Adam also insisted that Julia not take contraception as he wanted another child; Julia was forced to comply, but did not want to subject another child to Adam’s violence.

The control exercised by Adam’s mother extended to their relationship. They were unable to pay bills without her approval and, soon after the birth, Julia was forced to put the baby on formula milk so Adam’s mother could have the baby for overnight stays. Adam first hit Julia when she was holding their six-week-old baby. Yelling, dragging Julia through the house and throwing her out the front of the house became the norm in the relationship. Julia would regularly have bruising that she tried to conceal from friends, or she would simply not go out to avoid the embarrassment of having to explain her circumstances and justify staying with Adam so that the child had the care of both parents. Julia believes Adam was oblivious to the consequences to her and the baby; he would become so blind with anger that there were no boundaries to his violence. Adam’s mother often witnessed Adam’s violence and made no attempt to stop him. Julia regularly felt her own life was in danger, however always left the house to stay with her own mother if she believed the child was at risk. Julia has noticed that the child is now fearful around men, and cries at the sound of a deep voice.

Julia attempted to leave Adam on a number of occasions, however Adam threatened that the court would punish her for taking the child away from him. Julia’s greatest fear is losing the child. As he’d done previously, when Julia indicated that she would like to return to work, Adam threatened to sabotage her chances. While Adam didn’t harm Julia’s two cats, he did threaten not to allow her to take them if she left. Julia felt she could no longer deal with Adam’s manipulation so, for her own preservation, acquiesced to his behaviour and didn’t bother pursuing any of her own interests. Julia’s mother was concerned for her wellbeing and tried to talk to Adam, which resulted in a terrifying road rage incident. Adam repeatedly tried to exclude Julia’s mother from their lives.

On one occasion following Adam’s violence, Julia rang the police from her mother’s house. She was very reluctant to send the police to interview Adam as he had always told her that if she involved the police, he would say that she was the perpetrator, and would make sure she lost care of the child. Julia reports that the police were reasonably supportive; they gave her information about available counselling, and suggested she move in with her mum and keep away from Adam. They did not however encourage her to seek a protection order as they indicated that it may jeopardise her relationship with the child. At the time, Julia was confused by this approach and, in hindsight is dismayed, as she believes that a protection order would likely have prevented more violence and suffering.

Julia did leave the relationship and took the child to live with her mother. While Adam’s physical violence stopped, his abuse continued in the form of threats in text and voice messages including that he would send people to get her, that he would take the child, and that she deserved to be put in the gutter and kicked in the back of the head. Julia found these threats particularly frightening as she was often at home alone at night with the child while her mother worked night shifts. Again, she contacted police with the detail of Adam’s behaviour and they urged her to attend the station and have a protection order taken out. When she arrived, with the text and voice messages on her phone, she was told Adam’s threats weren’t sufficient to justify an order or to charge him with any offence such as stalking, and she would have to make an application for a protection order on her own behalf at the court. Julia felt embarrassed and distressed when she left the station, believing they thought she was simply trying to get attention. Julia then rang a police information line as she needed advice on the application process, and remarkably they told her to try another police station. When she did this, the police were more interested in Adam’s involvement with illicit drugs than the immediate threat of Adam’s violence and referred her to the court to obtain a protection order.

Julia downloaded the relevant forms and sought assistance from the court’s domestic violence support service. She appeared before a magistrate and obtained a temporary protection order against Adam. Julia felt that the magistrate had read her file carefully, took her circumstances seriously, and reassured her that she was doing the right thing for the right reasons. It was explained to Julia that she would be notified of a return date once Adam had been served; she was also aware that service may be delayed given Adam’s frequent absences for work.

Julia is also preparing a Family Court consent order application proposing that she have residence of the child and Adam have contact on similar terms to the current informal arrangements.

Adam has Julia’s mobile number so he can make contact in relation to arrangements for the child; however he is not aware of where Julia and the child live. Adam’s abusive behaviour continues in texts and phone calls when he unreasonably demands to see the child at short notice and Julia doesn’t comply. His anger escalates quickly, his language is profane and threats of violence continue. Julia has blocked Adam on Facebook, but believes that he posts on his own Facebook page long tirades accusing Julia of preventing him from seeing the child, and as a consequence she has been verbally attacked online by his followers.

Julia feels her life is starting to get back to normal now that she is dealing with the domestic violence and parenting matters, and she and the child are living away from Adam and in a safe and supportive environment with her mother. She is seeing friends again who she was cut off from when she was with Adam; Adam would either disallow visits or make them feel uncomfortable when they did visit. Many of Julia’s belongings including furniture were damaged from Adam throwing them into the yard, so when it came time for her to move to her mother’s house, she was left with very little. While Julia’s experience of the court support service is very positive, she remains concerned that the police disbelieve her, and she is therefore unlikely to seek their help in the future. Julia is keeping copies/recordings of all text and voicemail messages from Adam, and she has applied for legal aid to fund legal representation for the protection order hearing. Adam has transferred his accounts and assets to his mother and told Julia that she won’t get a cent. Julia has applied for a child support assessment.