Lisa and Sean were in a relationship for four years, and had a child together who was aged around two years at separation. Also living with them was Lisa’s primary school aged child from a previous relationship. Both of these children have disabilities and special needs. Lisa has adult children too; they have families of their own and live independently. Sean was still married to someone else when he and Lisa met through work. Lisa did not complete high school; however she has spent some years studying to gain qualifications that will enhance her employment prospects. Sean qualified in a trade and has held a well-remunerated position for at least as long as Lisa has known him. Sean has an illicit drug habit and misuses alcohol.

When Lisa and Sean moved in together, Sean wanted Lisa to stop work and be a stay-at-home mum. This was unfamiliar to Lisa as she had always worked to support herself and her children through years of mostly single parenting. Initially, she was thrilled by Sean’s generosity and the prospect that they could establish a happy, stable family life together without the pressure of her having to earn money. Over time however, Lisa realised that this was Sean’s way of asserting his control over her. Details also emerged about Sean that she hadn’t previously been aware of, in particular his history of serious drug use and ongoing use. In the first year of their relationship, Sean expected Lisa to support him through the difficulties he was experiencing in divorcing his wife and then with the illness of a close family member. Despite also having to study and care for a child with disabilities, Sean insisted that Lisa’s focus be on him. This was an intense time for Lisa; she miscarried, and then later successfully conceived.

During Lisa’s pregnancy, Sean’s behaviour towards Lisa became violent and abusive, and his drug use increased. He objected to Lisa making contact with her former work colleagues (especially males), and monitored her Facebook activity. The reception on Lisa’s phone network was so poor that Lisa was mostly unable to call friends. Sean, on the other hand, was in regular phone and Facebook contact with female friends, one of whom sent him provocative photos of herself. When Lisa suggested this was inappropriate, Sean got angry and told her she was jealous and paranoid. When Sean was coming down from a drug bender, he would anger easily, and shout at and belittle Lisa’s other child. This infuriated Lisa and she tried to stand her ground with him; Sean told her she wasn’t allowed to shout. On one occasion, Sean returned home, smashed his phone in front of Lisa, and then flung a heavy jacket and zipper across her pregnant stomach resulting in bleeding and long-term injury to the child. She spent over a week in hospital and was distressed knowing that her other child was in Sean’s care while he and friends had long sessions of alcohol and drug taking.

After their child was born, they moved to an isolated regional town so that Sean could take up a higher-paid position. Lisa only had access to the Centrelink family allowance payments to buy groceries, clothes and other household expenses. Sean made the mortgage repayments on the house and spent the balance of his wage as he wished. When Lisa asked him to supplement the family benefit payments, which were insufficient to cover the family’s needs, he would become aggressive and argumentative. Lisa was blamed for living costs and anything else that Sean refused to take responsibility for, including falling asleep at the wheel while driving, with Lisa and the children as passengers. Lisa has an ‘inside’ dog that she and her other child remain very close to. Sean made the dog live outside with his own dog, which inevitably resulted in fights. Sean told Lisa she needed to put her dog down; she resisted and kept the dog.

Sean made no effort to help with the care of the children, the dogs or the home. Lisa attended to all of these things even when their child was an infant and awake through the night with feeding and teething troubles. Early one morning, Lisa asked for help with the baby; Sean told her she was lazy, and went back to Facebooking his friends. Again, Lisa was exasperated by his response and kicked a large, empty water bottle along the floor towards him. Sean grabbed and threw her against the wall, dislocating and disfiguring her shoulder. While Tina screamed in pain, Sean yelled abuse at her for an hour before driving her to the hospital. He then apologised profusely, begging that Lisa not pursue charges. The hospital gave Lisa the name of a local domestic and family violence service, and referred them both to joint counselling, which they attended briefly. Sean refused a recommendation to attend all male counselling.

It was six months before Lisa was given an appointment for surgery to correct her serious shoulder injury. Meanwhile, she endured significant pain, and Sean subjected her to further violence. A particularly frightening incident involved Sean lifting Lisa up and throwing her through a door frame. She managed to head butt him and knock out two of his front teeth. She later suffered another miscarriage and prolonged bleeding. When it came time for Lisa’s surgery, a family member came to help out. This angered Sean too. When they left, Lisa was exhausted, managing her post-operative pain with medication, looking after the baby and older child, and sleeping on the couch to avoid confrontation with Sean. One evening, he demanded that Lisa have sex with him—as he always had—and, for the first time, she refused. He followed her around the house obsessively, and when in the baby’s room, punched his fist through the wall beside her head. The next morning, Sean left for work as if nothing had happened. Lisa packed up the children and her belongings, contacted the local domestic and family violence service and organised a Centrelink support payment, and drove to another state. Lisa arranged for her other child to stay with the child’s father with whom she has a healthy and constructive relationship; and Lisa and the baby went into temporary crisis accommodation until she could get set up in a rental house. She asked Sean to send money to assist as she knew he had extra cash.

Lisa had settled the children into their new home when Sean arrived wanting to see them, and seeking a reconciliation. Lisa agreed on the basis that they live in a city location. They moved into Sean’s former marital home (of which he was now the sole owner under Family Court orders) and resumed an intimate relationship. Lisa insisted on a lease in the event that things did not work out with Sean. She paid the rent and utilities bills, and Sean made the mortgage repayments. Before long, Lisa experienced further serious health problems, and required extended hospital treatment. Sean refused to take leave from work to care for the children, so she was forced to take them with her to the hospital. At this point, Lisa told Sean to leave the home as she’d had enough. She asserted her rights as lessee of the property. Periods of making up and breaking up followed, however they continued sexual relations.

Sean’s lawyers served an eviction notice on Lisa claiming that the property was to be sold. She vacated, and Sean moved back in; he had no intention of selling the property. Sean would often stay over at Lisa’s new address, and she agreed to informal and regular overnight contact arrangements. When she refused further sexual relations, and soon after her hospital treatment, Sean made an application for 50/50 shared residence of their child, notwithstanding the child’s very young age and special needs. Lisa applied for a protection order against Sean, but he persuaded her to withdraw it before service claiming that he would otherwise lose his job.

Over the following twelve months, the windows in Lisa’s house and car were repeatedly smashed, and her house was broken into on multiple occasions. She is certain that Sean and his friends were the offenders. Sean also parked out the front of the house from time to time in different vehicles, and publicly abused and demeaned her on Facebook. On police advice, Lisa obtained a temporary protection order against Sean, at the final hearing she was granted a 12 month protection order. Sean has made a cross application falsely alleging that Lisa misused alcohol during her pregnancy causing long-term harm to their child. Both applications were heard together. Lisa reported a breach of the temporary order involving Sean and others throwing rocks through her car windscreen and into her house near sleeping children. Police told her they were busy, and a photographer would attend in 24 hours. The current order allows Sean to ring the children at certain hours over the weekend. He is often stoned or drunk when he calls, and Lisa can never predict whether he’ll be cooperative or aggressive.

Family Court parenting and property proceedings resulted in Sean having fortnightly access, there were two family reports prepared but the findings were not followed by the court. Lisa suspects that the protection order hearing was deferred pending the outcome of the Family Court matters, which were scheduled for a later time . Sean was told by the judge at the interim hearing that he will not succeed on his shared residence application; he persisted regardless.

Sean was legally represented, Lisa was not. She has been unable to access Legal Aid, and continues to do her best to manage these legal matters herself, with considerable difficulty. Lisa is however appreciative of the understanding and practical help she has received from local community legal services, domestic and family violence services, and court support. Lisa is still concerned for her own safety and the safety of her younger child. She believes that Sean is incapable of taking proper care of the child who often returns home after contact visits with cuts, bruises and rashes. Lisa felt frustrated and intimidated by the delays in the resolution of the protection order and parenting and property matters, and Sean’s contribution to that delay.