Yvonne and Emir were in a relationship for around 13 years, and had four children together. Emir was born overseas; he did not complete high school, he is multi-lingual, English being a language acquired later in life, and he has periodically run small businesses. Yvonne was born in Australia, is university educated and runs her own business. They met in Emir’s home country when Yvonne was in the early years of her professional training. Within a year, they married and had their first child, and decided to resettle in Australia, Emir on a spousal visa. The children now live with Yvonne and her new partner in a home they own. The youngest child has contact with Emir pursuant to Family Court orders. The three older children have declined any contact.

When Yvonne first knew Emir he was gentle and quiet, but also strongly committed to his faith and spiritual beliefs. He followed a rigorous daily worship practice, and over the years required that the children strictly comply. In the early years Yvonne found Emir’s faith and dedication captivating, and was happy to participate even though she never felt like she really belonged. When they moved to Australia, Emir was drawn to a philosophy that aligned with his beliefs, and began attending places of worship. Soon he became very involved in his new-found faith community, following their ascetic lifestyle regimes, and volunteering. Meanwhile, Yvonne had three more children over six years; and worked full-time when she wasn’t caring for young children. Emir was opposed to contraception as he believed it was unnatural, and he refused to have a vasectomy as he felt it would diminish his masculinity. Rather ironically, it was the women from the faith community who urged Yvonne to consider contraception; she did so and never disclosed to Emir because she knew he would vehemently object.

Yvonne describes feeling a great deal of tension around multiple issues that Emir had strong views about and that Yvonne was unable to discuss with him without heightening the risk of conflict and his expression of hatred towards her. Emir exercised a high level of control over the daily lives of Yvonne and the children. The children were made to do hours of prayers in the mornings and evenings, which made them late for school and behind with their homework. Emir would dictate how prayers should be performed, and then often change the rules without explanation. If the children did it incorrectly, Emir would hit them across the face, or swing them around on one arm. While Yvonne experienced some physical violence, she says the children were frequent victims and subjected to the constant threat of more severe harm.

When Yvonne was heavily pregnant with their second child, Emir had insisted that she attend worship with him. They had to travel by train; Yvonne was tired and asked him whether it was necessary for her go. Emir became angry and pushed her towards the train line. Yvonne was terrified and walked kilometres to a family member’s house and stayed overnight. On another occasion, soon after Yvonne was home following the birth of their youngest child, a friend called to offer to look after the other children to give Yvonne and Emir a break. Emir declined, and Yvonne questioned him. He slapped her across the face twice while she was holding the baby, and told her never to question his authority especially in front of the children.

Increasingly, she felt unable to communicate with Emir about any difficult issue, so she shut down completely. Yvonne became even more isolated as a result of Emir excluding Yvonne’s family from the home as they didn’t adhere to the rules of his faith. Emir did not allow the children to attend an important family wedding despite Yvonne being a bridesmaid. Yvonne says she felt constantly strained and under pressure; she didn’t have any friends other than a small number in the faith community, nor did she believe she should.

Yvonne and Emir had separate bank accounts, but shared resources, although Emir would accumulate cash amounts from Centrelink payments or odd jobs and hide them from Yvonne. Finances were always tight for the family; Emir reprimanded Yvonne for even modest spending despite the fact that he earned little or no money and Yvonne was the consistent wage earner. Yet, Emir insisted on family trips overseas which were related to faith, these were expensive and required many months of saving to afford. Yvonne found these trips distressing with young children, and especially when pregnant, as the living standards were poor and public spaces generally unsafe. An incident that was particularly disturbing to Yvonne and the children occurred while they were on one of these trips. Emir believed that his younger relative had infringed a sacred ritual, and punished the child by burning an imprint deep in his hand. Family looked on, horrified. Since then, when Emir believed his own children to be disobedient, he would threaten similar punishment. The level of fear experienced by Yvonne and the children grew in increments over time; eventually Yvonne believed she would be killed. Her sister had expressed the feeling to her that she would arrive one day and they would all be dead.

Yvonne had tried to leave the relationship twice before final separation when she arranged for a family member to call a friend in the faith community and pass on a message to Emir that she and the children were leaving. Shelter accommodation was organised through a local domestic violence support service. From there, Yvonne worked with a lawyer to obtain a protection order and with a psychologist to try to identify and understand her experiences over the past many years. Yvonne received critical support from the shelter and these professionals. On the first mention date, Emir appeared with his lawyer and supporters from the faith community. He denied any domestic violence but consented to a two-year protection order without admissions. Yvonne’s lawyer guided her through the process and ensured that she felt safe in the court and protected from any direct approaches from Emir or his lawyer. Yvonne felt the order was important to have because she was fearful of how Emir would react to her taking the children away.

Again, with the assistance of her lawyer, Yvonne participated in mediation with Emir over the telephone in an effort to make arrangements for the children. This process failed as Emir denied all of the circumstances surrounding the breakdown of the relationship. Ultimately, Yvonne made an application to the Family Court. A separate representative was appointed for the children, and a psychologist was consulted to ascertain the children’s wishes. The three older children, who were then aged in their early to mid-teens, made it clear that they did not want to see their father. Orders were made by the court granting Yvonne residence and Emir, contact only with the youngest child once a fortnight at a supervised contact centre, gradually moving to overnight contact. Yvonne was required to email Emir to keep him generally updated about the children, and to facilitate email contact between the children and him. There was to be no phone contact. Yvonne believes that the psychologist could identify serious risks in Emir’s behaviour, particularly towards the children, justifying a highly protective approach to contact conditions.

Three years elapsed between separation and the Family Court orders. After the shelter, Yvonne and the children stayed in various forms of accommodation, and sought the help of multiple services for financial, legal and emotional support. Once the orders were settled, Yvonne and the children moved further away, necessitating a change in handover arrangements for the youngest child who, by that stage, was having overnight contact with Emir. On one occasion, Emir’s relative contacted Yvonne telling her that Emir and the youngest child had been crying together for hours. Yvonne knew this was out of character for the youngest child and became very concerned when the handover time passed at the agreed location. Emir returned the child late to a different location very close to their new home resulting in one of the children becoming extremely anxious about what Emir might do and needing significant counselling help in the aftermath. Yvonne observes how profoundly affected the three older children are by Emir’s prolonged abuse.

Yvonne is seeking further assistance from her lawyer to have the original contact orders reinstated as she believes the overnight contact is potentially detrimental to the youngest child. Meanwhile, the child is not having contact with Emir. Yvonne believes they have a good relationship, and Emir considers the child to be his favourite.

Property matters remain unresolved. The couple have land and money in Emir’s home country, but Yvonne has insufficient resources to take the necessary legal steps to facilitate a settlement of joint assets. She has received legal aid funding for past applications, but no longer qualifies, and has limited capacity to personally fund further actions. Yvonne is in a new relationship now, which she feels is going well, however she is cautious and on alert for any signs of the abuse she was subjected to for many years. She and her partner are building a business together, and caring for Yvonne’s four children. Yvonne feels she and the children are through the worst of their ordeal, though she believes there is always a risk that Emir will snap.