

Hannah Blair

I grew up in a conservative family in lower Alabama. I was always a goody-two shoes. I got straight A's, excelled in school, thought of myself as normal. But my childhood was filled with physical, emotional, and sexual abuse. After graduating from high school, I went off to college and in October of 2016, my life took a turn.

I had a roommate, and it was Halloween and there were lots of costume parties going on around town. We decided to go out and celebrate and we dressed up together as Risky Business. We went to a bar in the city that we knew about, and we met two guys from the Coast Guard and we both seemed to hit it off. We were having a great time together, the four of us, and I was really attracted to the guy I paired off with. We danced and were talking and also drinking and the night just got away from me. In any event, I ended up inviting him to come home with me. That night was the first night I ever had sex with anyone, so I got attached very quickly and I developed strong feelings for him. He said and did all the right things and as we spent time together, we got closer, and I thought of him as my boyfriend. He didn't live on the military installation, but he lived in military housing. He was being deployed soon so we felt like we had to make the most of our time together. He even said he wanted me to come home with him and meet his mother and his family, so I thought he was serious. During the time we were together, he would deploy because he was active duty. Honestly, I have no idea where, but he was never gone for long periods of time.

When he was home, he really liked to party. We went to all kinds of parties. He wasn't a street kind of guy – he also held private parties at his apartment and at other people's places he knew. At these parties there was always drinking. We also went to a lot of "pharm parties," where somehow there were always a lot of prescription drugs available. A big one was Xanax but there were others too. He didn't like hardcore street drugs – he kept saying that people who used street drugs were crazy because you could never trust what was in drugs you bought off the street. Later when the trafficking began, he also was against us using street drugs because they "diminished the product." Whatever connections he had, the alcohol and drugs were always flowing.

There were probably signs early on that the relationship wasn't right, but if there were, I ignored them. I was in love; I had a boyfriend who loved me back. I thought we would settle down together. I just had a fantasy in my head that I held on to so the first time he hit me, I set it aside and ignored it. I told myself that it was my fault, and I shouldn't have said what I said or that he just had these rages, and they were isolated incidents. So, we went on together because I was happy with him, and I loved him, and I would do anything for him.

So that's how it all first began. It started out that he asked me to do a favor for him and sleep with a friend of his. I know it sounds awful and crazy now, but back then I was so in love with him that when he asked, I said I would. A big part of me was also scared to say no. In the back of my head a voice was saying "this isn't right, don't do it," but I ignored it because I didn't want to lose him or for him to really hurt me. Plus, I was always high or drunk so it made me more compliant. Gradually it switched from favors to things I had to do and if I didn't do them, he got angry and violent and made threats against me and people in my life. I kept telling myself that he

loved me, and I held on to the things he said that made it sound like he was going to marry me, and we would make a life together.

I think the first time I had a conscious thought that something was not right was when I was pulling my clothes out of the laundry hamper one by one, and I found myself separating out the ones that were covered with blood from when he hit me, and I thought, “I shouldn’t be having to do this.” By that time, I was deep into a lifestyle of partying with him on a regular basis, having sex with “friends” of his (members of the community). I knew that he was getting money from them. He never gave me any money, but he was paying my bills, buying me clothes, taking care of me.

Where did the “friends” come from? He just seemed to know a lot of people – like I said he had connections everywhere. He threw outrageous parties that everyone wanted to come to and at first it was informal like that. But later he started putting ads up online. He always had me working under false names. I was Rachel Vickery and Isabella Something. He had fake IDs made up for me by one of his connections. I found out he was putting me up online because one of the people he sent me to was a man who had hired a college friend of mine as a nanny for his kids. When I got to the hotel and saw him, I was so embarrassed. There were times I didn’t want to do something, and my trafficker would fly into a rage and hurt me. I was in the emergency room and local urgent care more times than I can count. He also had a particular way of punishing me: I had a curling iron which I used to curl my hair. When he was especially angry at me or if I didn’t do what he told me to, he would heat up the curling iron and burn me with it on my back. This was one of the worst ways he hurt me because I was constantly on my back for “work.” I still have the scars from those burns. So, I was afraid of him, and I generally did what he said. He would call me and tell me – “You need to be at this hotel at this time” and I would go there and do what he said so I didn’t get hurt.

During that time many men purchased me. I’m sure some were from the military because the Coast Guard was so close. There were also law enforcement officials – one even came in his uniform – and many other men from different professions. I would say at the height of the trafficking I was going to private apartments and hotel rooms about four or five times a week on top of being at my trafficker’s parties every night.

My life as I had known it dropped away. When I met him, I was in my second semester in college, I was a children’s pastor, I had a part time job. I dropped out of college, left my church, and stopped working. My old world was gone. I just became a different person in a different world with, it seemed, no way out. I felt I couldn’t tell anyone what was happening to me.

Around that time some of my friends were trying to extricate me from the situation. One of my friends from college who was nannying for a man in the Coast Guard at the time told him what was going on. He got very upset and tried to confront my trafficker about what he was doing. Instead of the military police investigating, they reprimanded the man who made the confrontation. Later the way it was explained to me was that supposedly the Coast Guard was already investigating my trafficker (for many offenses including drugs) and they didn’t want the investigation blown, but it didn’t help me because I was still in danger.

Eventually, I tried to report him too. I went with a friend to the Military Police, but we didn't get a warm welcome or a fair hearing. Instead, the MP kept hammering me, as if I were the one being interrogated. She said things like, "How did you first proposition him in the bar?" or "When you're ready to tell the truth then you come back here." They made it seem like I was a prostitute trying to get one of their guys in trouble. I left humiliated and never tried to report him again. I found out about a year ago that my trafficker was dishonorably discharged from the Coast Guard, but I don't know what for.

I tried to get away from him, and during a short interlude when I was free of him, I got pregnant and had a son. When we "got back together" he would even use my son against me, threatening to hurt him, which frightened me more. I did what he said to protect myself, but mostly to protect my infant son from him.

Thank God I had friends who cared. They kept working to get me to safety and finally, two of my roommates just said, "We're moving" and we moved across several states. Since then, I have been working to put my life together again. I finished my bachelor's and now I'm in a master's program. I'm working on a degree in Social Justice and Human Rights. I also have begun work in the anti-trafficking movement, training law enforcement, prosecutors, healthcare providers, and social workers with the Pennsylvania CAC (Children's Advocacy Center). I'm also on the board for two different anti-trafficking non-profits and consult with organizations all over the country. I've become part of a growing movement of survivors who are speaking out. I want to help others, especially young people, understand what human trafficking is, how it occurs, and how to prevent it.