

In control: Dangerous relationships and how they end in murder – book review

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Sergeant Rob Lewis reviews Jane Monckton-Smith's 'gripping and informative read'

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Every four days in the UK, a woman is killed by her partner or ex-partner.

In her gripping and informative read, 'In control: Dangerous relationships and how they end in murder', Jane Monckton-Smith argues that this is a 'pandemic so severe' that we radically need to adapt our understanding of, and our approach to, domestic homicide.

The author's expertise, as both a former police officer and an academic, is evident throughout the book. She establishes that 'crimes of passion' are a myth – 'killers do not snap and lose control'. Killings take place as part of clear patterns of coercive control.

By recognising these patterns, we can track how – and why – risk may escalate for victims and we can provide crucial intervention. The book reminds us that coercive control is often difficult to identify and understand, despite its recognition in law.

'In control: Dangerous relationships and how they end in murder' by Jane Monckton-Smith

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Each of the eight chapters focuses on a different stage of Monckton-Smith's homicide timeline. These are demonstrated through case studies, homicide reviews, and interviews with perpetrators and the families and friends of victims.

Chapter one describes the first stage, which is having a history of controlling behaviour or stalking. It implores readers to look for 'red flags' in past relationships, as well as the likelihood that

somebody will repeat this behaviour.

For example, when Lenny first met Marcie, he immediately took control, telling her where to sit in the bar and insisting that he would pay for her drinks. Early on, he blamed past relationship failures on his ex-girlfriend, without acknowledging his own role. This alarming pattern can often be overlooked.

Chapter two explores 'the commitment whirlwind', where a controlling person moves things forward with a new partner extremely quickly or with intense persistence. This can happen subtly but the impact can be huge. The author describes the case of Astrid and Loki, where Loki stayed overnight and never went home. In Astrid's words: 'It wasn't like we made a decision, it just happened.'

Living with control is the third stage and the most substantial chapter. It describes how perpetrators establish and maintain control through fear and routines, some of which may seem innocuous. One example was Vincent's demand that the whole family would watch his favourite soap opera at the same time, every day. Everyone had to be there when the theme music started until the end.

Chapter four describes 'triggers', which can be danger signs and may include circumstances when perpetrators are challenged, such as when reports of domestic abuse are made to the police.

The process of escalation is examined in chapter five, with a focus on stalking based on fixation, obsession, unwanted contact and repeated behaviour.

Chapter six examines a change in thinking, which can help us to recognise signs of perpetrators planning to kill. In the case of Vincent, Donna told her family that she had not been forced to watch Coronation Street the night before she was murdered. Chapters seven and eight cover planning and carrying out the homicide, including insights into some well-known cases.

Police officers and practitioners will find this book illuminating. It invites them to consider previous investigations and to adapt their thinking for future cases. The author describes the case of Kasia, whose death was initially identified as being caused by suicide by illegal drug use, despite her having no history of drug misuse.

Evidence of coercive control and physical injuries led to a reinvestigation, which challenged initial assumptions and resulted in Kasia's case being correctly identified as a murder.

'In control' provides an honest and detailed pathway through the homicide timeline, addressing the challenges that we face in recognising signs of coercive control. In doing so, it reaffirms our responsibility to consider our approach through this lens.

- This article was peer reviewed by Sergeant Sam Knott, North Yorkshire Police

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