AN EBOOK BY DEVON BROUGH

FLAG FREE

25 Markers of a Relationship That Can Hold You.

DEVON BROUGH
Author of The Reluctant Narcissist

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By Devon Brough
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A companion guide to 25 Red Flags.

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OPENING

A note from Devon.

A year ago, the woman I love wouldn't have felt safe enough with me to stomp in puddles.

She wouldn't have picked dandelions and held them up to the light. She wouldn't have laughed from her belly the way she did this week, somewhere on a quiet street in Romania, the rain still falling. She wouldn't have softened, in front of me, into a version of herself she hadn't been since she was a little girl.

This week, she did all of it.

Her parents sent a message that evening. They said it was so good to see her authentic again. So good to see her so happy. They didn't know what they were really saying. They were saying: she has not been able to be herself for a long time. And now she can.

The reason she could wasn't because she finally relaxed, or because the weather was nice, or because we were on holiday. The reason was that the man standing next to her had spent the last several years becoming someone she could actually rest beside.

I am not writing this guide because I am a man who has always known how to love a woman well. I am writing it because I had to become one. And what I learned along the way — about what safety looks like, what it feels like in the body, what it costs a man to build it and what it costs a woman to receive it — is what I want to give you here.

Twenty-five markers. Some of them you may already recognise. Some of them may sound, at first, like nothing at all. That second category is the one I want you to pay closest attention to. The flags that don't announce themselves are usually the ones doing the most work.

> *This is what I had to learn. This is what you deserve.*

OPENING

Why this guide exists.

You downloaded 25 Red Flags because something didn't sit right.

Maybe you'd been Googling at one in the morning. Maybe a friend sent you the link. Maybe you'd been reading about narcissistic relationships for months and one more PDF wasn't going to hurt. Whatever brought you to it, you came because you needed a name for what you were experiencing. You wanted to know whether you were imagining it, exaggerating it, being too sensitive — or whether the thing you'd been calling love had been something else entirely.

You probably found a lot of yourself in those pages.

But naming what you don't want is only half the work.

The other half is knowing what you actually deserve — clearly enough that you'd recognise it if it walked into the room. Clearly enough that you wouldn't mistake it for boredom. Clearly enough that when it finally arrives, your nervous system has somewhere to point to and say, this. This is what we were waiting for.

This guide is the other half.

Twenty-five markers of a man who is safe to love. Organised into five movements that mirror the five stages of the relationship you may have just left — because the opposite of each stage is its own kind of work. Its own kind of recognition. Its own kind of letting yourself be loved without flinching.

Before you read the markers, I need to tell you something difficult. It's the most important thing in this guide. If you skip it, the rest will not land the way it needs to.

OPENING

Why safe feels boring.

(and why that's the work)

Your nervous system has been trained on chaos.

Not by choice. Not because you wanted it that way. But because for months or years or possibly your whole life, the love you knew was inconsistent. It came in waves. It rewarded you brilliantly one day and starved you the next. It taught your body that love is a thing you have to chase, decode, manage, earn. That intimacy lives in the highs. That if there is no peak, there is no love.

In the book this guide is a companion to, I write about the science of this. Researchers call it the trauma bond, and the engine that builds it is something called intermittent reinforcement — affection alternated with criticism, connection alternated with abandonment. Over time, the nervous system becomes addicted to the highs and lows. It becomes addicted, in a literal physiological sense, to the very thing that is hurting you.

Here is the sentence from that book that you need to read twice.

> *If your nervous system confuses chaos for passion, safety may feel boring.*

Read it again.

Because this is the moment that will, more than any other moment, determine whether you ever get to be loved well. When a safe man arrives — steady, present, available, predictable, not making you chase, not making you wonder, not running hot then cold — your body will read it as absence. As flat. As not enough. As no spark.

That feeling is not the truth about him.

That feeling is the trauma bond talking.

The single most dangerous moment in a healing woman's life is the moment she meets a safe man and friend-zones him because he doesn't make her chase. Because he asked her out twice and didn't text for three days afterwards. Because he was direct about his interest and she couldn't feel the rush. Because he didn't perform for her, didn't disappear, didn't make her wait — and her body, trained on the slot machine, registered the steadiness as nothing.

That is the moment most women circle back to the next narcissist.

Not because they chose to. Because their nervous system did.

So I am asking you, before you read another page, to notice.

Every time you read one of the twenty-five markers in this guide and your first reaction is some version of *that sounds boring*, or *that's not realistic*, or *where's the passion* — mark it. Notice it. Sit with it. That reaction is the most reliable diagnostic you have for how much work your nervous system

still has to do.

The markers in this guide are not exciting in the way you have been taught to want excitement. They are foundational. They are the ground a real relationship is built on. The excitement comes later, and it is a different kind. It is the excitement of being met, not the adrenaline of being hunted. The relief of being chosen quietly, not the chemistry of being almost-chosen on a loop.

Your job, while you read this, is to let safe be re-defined in your body.

Slowly. Page by page. Marker by marker.

The boring is the work.

MOVEMENT ONE

How he meets you.

In the relationship you may have just left, the beginning was probably the best part. He was attentive in a way no one had ever been. He listened with such intensity. He made you feel chosen — not the way other men had made you feel chosen, but completely. Total. Like the world had finally arranged itself around you.

That feeling has a name. It's called love bombing. And it is the most reliable opening move of someone who is not safe to love.

A man who is safe to love does not meet you that way.

He meets you with curiosity. With attention. With interest that has shape and texture. But not with a flood. Not with a performance. Not with an intensity that would make any reasonable nervous system suspicious.

Here are the first five markers.

01

He moves at a pace that lets you stay in your body.

There is no urgency. No scarcity. No *I've never felt this way before* on day three. He doesn't push past your timeline to lock you in. He doesn't make you feel that if you don't decide quickly, the chance will be gone. The pace is steady. You can feel your own breath inside it. You can think clearly about whether you want this, because nothing about him is engineered to override your thinking.

WHAT YOUR BODY DOES

It doesn't race. It doesn't brace. You go home from your second date and you can sleep.

02

He is curious about your life as it is, not your life as a project for him to enter.

He asks about your friends. Your routines. Your work. The things you do on a Tuesday. He wants to know the shape of your actual life — not because he is trying to figure out how to insert himself as the centre of it, but because he is genuinely interested in the person you already are. He has no ambition to become the only thing you do.

WHAT YOUR BODY DOES

You don't feel scanned. You feel known.

03

He is specific about what he likes in you.

Not *you're amazing*. Not *you're so different from other women*. Not *I can't believe you exist*. He says something like, *I noticed how you handled that conversation with your sister.* Or, *I like the way you think about your work.* Or, *the way you laugh when you're actually amused — not the polite one — is one of my favourite things.* Generic flattery is a love bomb. Specific noticing is intimacy. He has been paying attention to you, not performing attention at you.

WHAT YOUR BODY DOES

You feel seen for who you actually are. Not who you are performing as.

04

He has a full life that existed before you and continues alongside you.

He has friends he sees regularly. He has work he cares about. He has a Saturday morning routine he doesn't abandon the moment you arrive. He doesn't try to become your entire world, and he doesn't try to make you his. The relationship is one important thing inside two full lives, not the single thing that holds both of you up.

WHAT YOUR BODY DOES

You don't feel responsible for keeping him going. You can be apart from him and the room stays the same temperature.

05

He is the same person on date one as he is on date ten.

The man you met is the man you got. No mask drops. No second face appears in week six. No new personality enters the room once you have committed. The boring stability of that — the absence of any plot twist — is the entire point. There is no other version of him you are about to discover.

WHAT YOUR BODY DOES

It stops scanning. The vigilance you have carried for years starts, slowly, to set itself down.

A narcissist performs interest.

A safe man embodies it.

MOVEMENT TWO

How he handles conflict.

If you came out of a narcissistic relationship, you probably learned that saying anything difficult was dangerous. You learned that bringing something up meant being punished. Being shut down. Being twisted into the bad guy. Being made to apologise for raising it in the first place.

Over time, you stopped raising things. You swallowed your own words. You rehearsed sentences in your head for weeks and then never said them. You learned to be smaller. Quieter. Less inconvenient.

The single most healing experience available to you in a new relationship is discovering that you can say a hard thing, and the man across from you will receive it with softness.

Not with collapse. Not with a competing emotion. Not with the conversation suddenly being about him.

With softness.

These five markers are what that looks like.

06

You can say anything to him and he receives it without making you wrong for saying it.

You can name a feeling. You can raise a concern. You can disagree with him. You can be confused, hurt, irritated, scared. He may disagree with your interpretation. He may need a moment. He may have his own response. What he will not do is shame you for raising it. He will not flip it back to make you the problem for having brought it up at all. You can speak without having to manage how he will receive your speaking.

07

When you are upset, he gets curious instead of defensive.

His first question is not *why are you attacking me*. It is not *what did I do wrong now*. It is something more like, *what's going on for you*. Or, *tell me more*. Or, *I can see you're upset — I'm listening*. The orientation is towards you, not towards his own self-defence. He treats your distress as information about you, not as a verdict on him.

08

He apologises specifically.

Not *I'm sorry you feel that way*. Not *I'm sorry if I hurt you*. Not *I'm sorry but I was going through a lot*. He says, *I'm sorry for what I did*. *I'm sorry that I spoke to you that way*. *I'm sorry that I didn't listen when you first told me*. He names the thing. He doesn't soften it. He doesn't hide behind a conditional. The apology is for the act, not for your reaction to the act. One is repair. The other is gaslighting in a politer voice.

09

Disagreements end.

They don’t become four-day silent treatments. They don’t become three-week cold wars. They don’t become a permanent file he opens every time things get hard, where every old fight is still inside, ready to be deployed. The conflict gets resolved and then it actually goes away. You move on. He moves on. The relationship does not carry the unfinished weight of every previous rupture.

10

He never weaponises your vulnerabilities.

The things you told him in soft moments stay in soft moments. The fears you confessed at two in the morning are not pulled out during a fight to hurt you. Your history is not held against you. Your sensitivities are not used as ammunition. What you have entrusted to him stays trusted. The intimacy you risked is honoured, not weaponised.

A narcissist makes conflict a punishment.

A safe man makes it a conversation.

MOVEMENT THREE

How he holds your softness.

There is a version of you that you may not have met in years.

She picks dandelions. She stomps in puddles. She laughs from her belly, not her throat. She doesn't perform. She doesn't manage anyone else's mood. She doesn't make herself useful in order to be allowed to stay. She is just there, in her own body, available to her own joy.

Most women who have loved a narcissist haven't seen her in a long time.

She didn't disappear because she got older or because life got serious. She disappeared because softness, in your last relationship, was unsafe. To soften was to be exploited. To be small was to be punished. To be openly happy about something he didn't cause was to be punished in a different way. So you got harder. You got more competent. You got less spontaneous. You got more useful and less alive.

A safe man is a man around whom the dandelion-picking version of you is allowed to exist again. Not performed. Not earned. Just present.

These five markers are how you will know.

11

He lets you be small without making it weakness.

You don’t have to be strong all the time. You don’t have to be sexy all the time. You don’t have to be impressive, capable, witty, regulated, beautifully turned out, emotionally available, intellectually engaging. Sometimes you are tired. Sometimes you are quiet. Sometimes you are sad and you can’t name why. None of these states cost you anything in his eyes. You don’t become less in them. You don’t have to apologise for them.

12

He notices when you are tired before you say anything.

He sees it in your shoulders. In the way you sit down. In the rhythm of your sentences. He brings you tea you didn't ask for. He says, *you look like you've had a long day.* He doesn't make you ask for the basic care that should already be there. The noticing is the love. You do not have to perform need before he is permitted to meet it.

13

He does not compete with your softness or punish it.

When you are vulnerable, his ego does not enter the room. He does not need to fix you. He does not need to top your story with his. He does not need to rescue you in a way that turns him into the hero. He does not get cold because your need has made him feel small. He just stays. He sits next to you. He keeps his hand on your back. The softness you are showing does not threaten anything in him, because nothing in him is performing.

14

He receives your joy as joy.

Not as suspicion. Not as something he needs to dim because he didn't cause it. Not as a sign you are about to leave him, or that you don't need him, or that you are getting too independent. When you come home from a good lunch with a friend, glowing, full of stories, he is glad you had it. When you are happy about a win at work, he is happy with you. Your joy does not have to be routed through him to be allowed. He is not competing with the rest of your life.

15

Your nervous system settles around him.

This is the most important marker in this guide. It is a body sign, not a thought. Your shoulders drop. Your breath deepens. The low hum of vigilance you have carried for years — the constant scanning of his mood, of his proximity, of what he might need from you next — starts to quiet. You don't have to think about it. It just happens. After fifteen minutes in a room with him, you are different in your body than you were when you walked in.

This is the marker your mind cannot fake and your trauma bond cannot manufacture. If your nervous system settles around him, that is the answer. Trust it.

A narcissist treats your softness as a resource.

A safe man treats it as a privilege.

MOVEMENT FOUR

How he holds himself.

There is a moment in the narcissistic relationship that almost every woman who has survived one will recognise.

You are exhausted. You have been carrying everything — the emotional weather of the house, the management of his moods, the explanation of your own needs, the prediction of his reactions, the constant adjustment of your own behaviour to keep things calm. And one day it lands, slowly, that the entire inner life of this man — every feeling, every reaction, every disappointment, every wound — has somehow become your job. You are not his partner. You are his unpaid therapist. You are the one carrying the weight of two people, and the bill keeps arriving in your name.

A man who cannot hold himself accountable will eventually hand you the bill for his entire inner life.

A safe man does his own work. Not perfectly. Not all the time. But visibly, and on his own initiative, and not for your applause.

These five markers are how you will know.

16

He knows his own patterns.

He can name them. He doesn't pretend he is a finished product. He has language for the ways he gets defensive, withdrawn, anxious, controlling, avoidant. He knows what activates him and roughly why. He talks about the work he is still doing without making it your job to manage. The self-awareness is real, not performed — meaning it shows up before the rupture, not just as an apology after one.

17

He regulates his own emotions.

When he is stressed, anxious, angry, you can feel it — but you are not made responsible for fixing it. He has his own ways of coming back to himself. He goes for a walk. He calls a friend. He sits with it. He does the breath work, the gym session, the journaling, the prayer, whatever the practice is. He doesn't make his bad day your project. You are allowed to support him. You are not required to manage him.

18

He has men in his life who challenge him.

Not just friends who agree with him. Not just people he can be the leader of. People who push him. Who hold him to a higher version of himself. Who call him out when he is wrong. When he has done something that doesn't sit right, there is someone in his life who will say it to him before you ever have to. The work he does in private is witnessed by other men, not just by you.

19

He owns his impact, not just his intention.

He does not say *I didn't mean to* as if that erases what happened. He understands that the effect of what he did on you is its own real thing, separate from whether he meant it. He cares about how his actions landed. He doesn't argue with you about whether you should have been hurt. If you were hurt, that is the data. He works with the data.

20

He talks about his own father, his own childhood, his own wounds — without performing them, without hiding them, and without making them an excuse.

There is a way some men weaponise their pain. They tell you the story early, dramatically, to gain your sympathy and your loyalty before you have had the chance to see them clearly. That is not what a safe man does. He talks about his story when it is relevant. He owns it. He does not use it to manipulate you into staying. He is in honest relationship with his own history, which means he is in honest relationship with you.

A narcissist needs you to manage him.

A safe man manages himself, so he can actually love you.

MOVEMENT FIVE

How he loves over time.

In the narcissistic relationship, love was a weather system.

Sunny one week. Hurricane the next. A long, golden patch where everything was perfect and you thought, *this is it, this is the version that's going to stay*. And then a cold front you didn't see coming. And then, eventually, the sun again. And you, learning to live inside the climate. Watching the sky. Predicting the weather. Adjusting your behaviour to whatever season he was in.

Real love, you will find, is much less dramatic than the love you survived.

It is not a series of peaks and crashes. It is a steady ground that lets you grow upward. The boring part is the part that is actually working.

These last five markers are about time. They are the ones that only show themselves after months and years. They are what you should be watching for once the initial sweetness of a new relationship has settled into the long arc.

21

He repairs after rupture, every time.

Conflict will happen. Misunderstandings will happen. He will mess up. You will mess up. What matters is what comes next. He comes back. He owns his part. He re-establishes the connection. He doesn't let things drift, leak, harden, or become precedent. The repair is the relationship. It is not the exception to the relationship. It is the thing that makes the relationship work.

22

His love does not depend on your performance.

You don’t have to earn it back when you fall short. When you gain weight. When you lose a job. When you have a bad month. When you grow into a version of yourself he did not expect. When you change your hair, change your mind, change your career. His love is not contingent on you being a particular version of yourself for him. He is not loving the image. He is loving the person.

23

He is consistent across contexts.

The way he treats you in private and in public is the same. The way he speaks about you to his friends is the same as how he speaks to you. The man at the dinner party is the man at breakfast. There is no second version of him you only meet behind closed doors. There is no charming public self and bitter private self. You can stop bracing for the door to close behind you, because nothing changes when it does.

24

He grows with you, not against you.

Your becoming does not threaten him. Your success does not shrink him. Your healing does not make him jealous. When you start therapy, he is glad. When you take a new job, he is proud. When you spend a weekend on a women's retreat and come back changed, he wants to hear about it. He is rooting for the version of you that is still arriving. He understands that a partner who is becoming her fullest self is not a threat to the relationship. She is the relationship.

25

He is still here.

Not just present. Chosen.

He keeps choosing you. In ordinary moments. In the small things. On the days when there is no reason to perform, no anniversary to remember, no fight to recover from. Just on a Wednesday, when he brings you coffee the way you like it. On a Sunday afternoon, when he asks if you want to walk. After three years and after thirty. He is the one still choosing.

That is the whole thing. That is what love actually is.

Not the love bomb. Not the chase. Not the chemistry. Not the chaos.

The choosing, again, on a Wednesday.

A narcissist loves you in cycles.

A safe man loves you in continuity.

CLOSING

Your work.

The half of this nobody talks about

Reading this guide and recognising a safe man is one thing.

Letting him actually love you is another.

The work is not just finding him. The work is becoming a woman who can receive him. And that is the part of healing nobody warns you about, because the marketing of recovery is all about identifying the bad guy. It is much less glamorous to say that the next chapter of your healing is in your own body, your own nervous system, your own capacity to stay open when someone safe arrives and you feel nothing.

When a safe man arrives, your nervous system may try to sabotage the relationship.

It will not feel that dramatic. It will feel like little things. You will pick a small fight to get the familiar chemistry going. You will test him to see if he will prove untrustworthy. You will feel restless, or numb, or off, on a perfectly ordinary evening when nothing is wrong. You will find yourself missing the high of the previous relationship, even though you remember exactly what came after the high. You will wonder if you are bored. You will wonder if this is enough. You will wonder if you are settling. You will wonder if your old partner — for all his damage — was just more alive than this one.

None of that is the truth about him.

All of it is the trauma bond, looking for its next fix.

Receiving safety is a skill. It is built slowly. It looks like this.

It looks like noticing when your body is bracing for something that isn't coming. Catching yourself before you create a problem in order to feel alive. Letting yourself be cared for without immediately repaying it, balancing the scales, evening the score. Letting him hold the door without making a joke about it. Letting him be in his masculine without trying to take it from him, compete with it, or shrink it down to something more familiar.

It looks like sitting with the strange, almost grief-like flatness of a Tuesday night when nothing is wrong and nobody is in crisis, and learning that this — this — is what peace feels like. Peace is not the absence of love. Peace is the floor that love can finally stand on.

The woman I love, the one I told you about at the beginning of this guide, could only stomp in those puddles because I had become safe. That is half the story.

The other half is that she had done her own work to receive that safety. She had spent years learning to recognise her own patterns, to feel her own body, to let herself be cared for, to soften without scanning the room first. The puddle-stomping was not a miracle of my making. It was a meeting of two people, each having done their separate, private work.

Both halves are required.

The man arrives, or doesn't. That part is partly out of your control.

The woman who can receive him — that is yours.

CLOSING

How a man becomes safe.

The question you may still be asking

Somewhere in the reading of this guide, a question has probably formed.

Can he change? Can mine?

Every woman with a narcissistic partner — current or former — eventually asks it. It is one of the most haunting questions in the entire architecture of this kind of pain. Because if the answer is yes, then the years you spent might not have been wasted. And if the answer is no, then you have to accept that the person you loved was not going to become the person you hoped for, no matter how long you waited.

I want to be honest with you, because false hope is its own form of cruelty.

Some men can change. Most won't.

The conditions for real change are specific, and they are hard.

He has to see his own pattern. Not because you told him. Not because you finally got through to him. Not because he is afraid of losing you. He has to see it from the inside, with his own eyes, and feel the truth of it land in his own chest.

He has to want to change for himself, not to keep you. Change that is performed to retain a partner is not change. It is strategy. It collapses the moment the partner is no longer at risk of leaving.

He has to do the work consistently when no one is watching. Therapy. Recovery groups. Men's work. Honest friendships with other men who will hold him accountable. Practice, over years, of regulating his own emotions, owning his impact, sitting with discomfort without weaponising it.

And he has to be willing to lose what his pattern was protecting. Because the patterns you saw in him — the charm, the control, the need to be admired, the inability to be vulnerable — were not random. They were doing a job. They were protecting him from feeling something he could not bear to feel. To change is to feel that thing, on purpose, for as long as it takes.

This is the work I documented in my book, The Reluctant Narcissist.

It is not a book about your ex. It is a book about my own version of becoming safe — what I had to face, what I had to lose, what I had to learn, and what real change actually looks like from the inside.

I wrote it for two readers. Men who suspect they may be the problem in their own lives, and who are ready to look. And the women who have loved them, who want to understand, at a depth nothing else has offered, what was happening inside the man who hurt them — and what a man who has actually done the work sounds like.

If you want to know what the conditions for real change look like, in language that does not lie to you, that is where to look.

THE BOOK

The Reluctant Narcissist by Devon Brough. Available as a signed paperback at **devonbrough.com/trn-signed**, or through your usual bookseller.

CLOSING

A final note.

Somewhere ahead of you is a man you have not met yet.

Or, possibly, one you have already met and did not see.

He will not be loud. He will not be a performance. He will not arrive with the intensity that your nervous system has been trained to recognise as love. He may, at first, feel boring.

> *That feeling is the last lie your nervous system will tell you before it finally lets you rest.*

You deserve to stomp in puddles again.

You deserve to pick dandelions. To laugh from your belly. To soften in front of a man and have him hold the room around you while you do it. You deserve to feel your shoulders drop when he walks in. To say a hard thing and watch his face stay open. To rest, not because the storm has passed, but because there was never a storm — there was just you, and him, and a Wednesday.

This is what you have been working for.

Not the chase. Not the chemistry. Not the saving of someone who never wanted to be saved.

This.

Whatever this turns out to look like, in your specific life, with your specific story. The shape of it does not matter. What matters is that, when it arrives, you will be the woman who can recognise it. And let it stay.

— *Devon*

WHAT COMES NEXT

Where to go from here.

If something in this guide has landed, here are the next steps in the work.

Start with the first two lessons. They are free.

The opening lesson of the online course and the one after it are open to everyone. No card, no sign-up wall, and they do not expire. It is me explaining, on camera, what was actually happening inside the man who hurt you. About thirty-five minutes for the pair.

Watch them at **devonbrough.com/start**.

Read The Reluctant Narcissist.

The book this guide is a companion to. A confessional account of the patterns I have described here, written from the inside. For the woman who wants to understand, at depth, what was happening in the relationship she just left. And for the woman who wants to know what real change looks like, so she can recognise it if it ever appears in her life again.

The digital edition is R99 at **devonbrough.com/trn-book**, or I sign a paperback and post it to you for R200 at **devonbrough.com/trn-signed**.

Take the online course.

The walkable version of this work. The book is the map; the course is the road through it. Eight modules and a closing session, about five and a half hours, with a 108-page workbook that every module refers to by page. It covers what it takes for a man to become safe, what it takes for a woman to receive him once he has, and the ground both of you have to learn to stand on together.

Enrol at **devonbrough.com/trn-course**.

Stay on the list.

You are already on it. I will write to you, not too often, with things I am thinking about, things I am learning, and the occasional letter that will probably arrive on a day you need it.

If at any point the writing is not for you, the unsubscribe link is at the bottom of every email. No hard feelings. The work has to meet you where you are.

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