

Nothing I can put in words will fully describe what I've been through with Clifford or the multitude of ways he has hurt me and many other people, but here is my account.

On the second weekend of December 2022, my boyfriend, Clifford Ludena, helped me move from Denver to Tucson. We had met in Tucson over 2.5 years ago, the week before everything shut down from COVID. I was finishing up graduate school and preparing to move to Denver to begin my career, and he was working at BICAS at the time. The first few months of being together was pure excitement—we planned cute dates for each other, talked for hours on end, and shared a strong physical connection. I liked that Clifford seemed unique, thoughtful, and emotionally competent. We spent almost every day together that spring, and after I moved to Denver, we began visiting each other in our respective cities. In summer 2020, we said “I love you” and decided to begin a long-distance relationship. Although I had done long-distance with previous partners and was hesitant to try it again, we felt that our connection was too strong to throw away. We started with an open relationship, which I had never tried before and honestly learned was not for me. After a brief breakup in January 2021, I expressed that I was only interested in getting back together if we were monogamous. Clifford told me that what we shared was worth it, and we dated monogamously for two more years.

Despite the distance, Clifford and I saw each other frequently and managed to spend long chunks of time with each other in both cities, including living together for 3 months in Tucson this summer (2022). He became integrated into my Tucson and Denver friend groups and I grew close to his mom and family in Tucson. We traveled together, talked on the phone non-stop when we were apart, and planned our time off according to each other's schedules. In December 2022, I decided to leave a much-coveted position in my organization so that I could move to Tucson and be together. We were finally closing the long-distance gap, moving in together, and cementing the future that we had dreamed about for the past two years. We had plans to buy a house, travel by RV, and grow old together.

Two days later, my entire world came crashing down when I was handed two letters from Clifford's other partners with graphic accounts of being sexually and emotionally abused by him. In that instant, everything about my own relationship with Clifford made sense. The intense emotional abuse that was so normalized in our relationship became immediately apparent and even before I finished reading the first page, I frantically started throwing all of my things together and literally running out of his life in fear of my safety. I was immediately validated for the deep, dark feeling I always knew I had about him but couldn't put my finger on.

Despite all the cute dates and the exciting getting-to-know each other period, the first year of our relationship was incredibly tumultuous. Clifford was highly controlling and emotionally manipulative. He forced me to cut off friendships with multiple friends, required that I ask permission to be in group settings with certain men, and thoroughly questioned me after attending any social gathering. In one instance, he accused me of “collecting people for my own validation,” in reference to my friendships. Another time, he told me that I had “no filter for who I kept as friends” and asked if the reason I liked meeting new people was to get hit on. One of Clifford's tactics was to instigate huge emotional blowups over tiny or non-existent issues and then withhold his affection until I relented, often days later. For example, one time Clifford accused me of making too much eye contact with a male friend instead of his girlfriend during a conversation I was having with the couple. He told me that he could tell that I had

“weirded out” the girlfriend, and that he could see her extreme uncomfortableness with me. I felt awful and followed up with the couple afterwards, who were bewildered by his comments. Still, after countless conflicts like this, I started to filter what I said, dampen my reactions and expressions during conversations with men, and avoid certain topics that could later trigger a blowup. Using shame and constructed guilt to control another person is his speciality. Even when Clifford was not around, I found my behavior altered— I would stop myself from wearing makeup or shaving my legs for fear that he would find out that I shaved prior to seeing a male friend and think that I did it for the friend. I also stopped joking around with male friends completely, and by the end of our relationship, barely made eye contact with male strangers and almost exclusively spent time with female friends. At one point, I wrote in my journal that I was afraid to be myself.

Many times during the first year we were together, I googled “signs of emotional manipulation” or “narcissistic abuse,” and strongly related to what I would find. I even had a few of these tabs bookmarked and would re-read during times of crises, trying to convince myself to end things. I also kept multiple google docs titled “Relationship issues,” “More relationship stuff” and “Relationship issues executive summary” (I kid you not), filled with all of the ways I felt mistreated by him. The intent was to use all of the examples I noted down as fodder for a breakup. Yet, Clifford had a way of making things seem normal when I brought up issues. He acknowledged our conflicts, but celebrated how much we were growing together and how important it was to work through things. He told me he had learned how to manage healthy conflict through couples counseling with past partners, he shared books with me about how to foster strong relationships, and he expressed how much he wanted to be in a relationship that felt safe for both of us. I had never been in such a serious relationship where I was “working through” so much conflict with another person, so I trusted what he was saying and saw it as an opportunity to put real work into a lasting relationship. I created lists of all the things I cherished about him, I apologized for things I shouldn’t have, and I tried to be grateful for the good times.

Clifford also had a way of eliciting sympathy from me any time he crossed a line during our arguments. He told me his father had abused him growing up, but that he’d been to therapy and was continuing to “put in work”. He once wrote that he was a “queer cis male person of color” whose “experiences and trauma have shaped the way [he] was,” and that he needed “a partner who is not afraid of loving someone who is broken.” I empathized with his struggle and downplayed his manipulative and controlling habits, admiring his self-awareness and understanding that things would change. He asked for patience and told me he would never intentionally hurt me. He pointed out all the ways that he had been patient with me, and told me that no one else would have stuck around for me like he did, so he expected the same patience. In actuality, Clifford was weaponizing language that he had learned in therapy and in the social activist scene, then using that language and my sympathy against me.

Clifford was highly skilled in creating the illusion that he was a safe, socially-conscientious person deeply involved in the Tucson queer/activist community. He touted his connections with strong, badass women, told me that he volunteered for a sexual assault prevention organization, and frequently denounced other men for not doing enough to lift up women. When we were out and about, he constantly pointed out people that he knew. Although he was seemingly well socially-connected from the many stories I heard of his Tucson community, we never actually spent time with his friends when I visited. At first, he cited the pandemic. Then, after an argument, he said he didn’t trust me enough to bring me around the queer scene.

When I finally gained his trust, he explained that his friends were “too cool” to meet new people and that I wouldn't feel welcomed. When we *did* run into his “friends”, it was always awkward. Few people seemed enthused to meet me or even to chat with Clifford. He told me how hard it was to make adult friends and I sympathized without pushing a touchy subject more. The truth was, Clifford had started to develop a bad reputation in Tucson that I was unable to perceive as an outsider to the local community.

As we grew closer, Clifford continued to isolate me from friends and family– constantly making remarks on my friends' negative qualities and picking out things I had never noticed. He twisted my friends' appropriate reactions to things that I had shared with them by saying that they didn't understand real relationships. He asserted that what we had was more intense and special than anything they'd been through and they therefore wouldn't be able to relate to the bond we held. He accused me of oversharing, he constantly chided other people's opinions and behaviors, and he made it seem like our connection was coveted and worth protecting, despite our many conflicts.

Clifford's modus operandi was vacillating between intense love-bombing and ice coldness. If I would try to address his distance, he would tell me that I was too needy and that all relationships go through ups and downs. After being particularly standoffish on my birthday one year, he told me that he couldn't be “lovey” all the time and that I was expecting too much out of him. (I later learned my birthday was days after his anniversary with his *other* partner, and I'm sure he was in conflict with them over spending their anniversary with me). Standing up for myself would precipitate huge blow ups and threats to end the relationship, saying that he wasn't sure if he could provide all that I was asking for. Instead, I learned to turn inward, repress my own needs, and wait until he would want affection again, since it was easier than enduring further conflict.

While maintaining his coldness, Clifford would of course still want his physical needs met, which were never-ending. In the bedroom, he would consistently disrespect my limits, relentlessly asking for certain sexual acts or guilt me into doing something over and over until I relented. (This was even true for acts that would worsen a health issue I have, which he was fully aware of and which I would remind him of every time he pushed me). Oftentimes, I would be in physical pain, pushing him away with my hands or silently crying. Noticing my resistance, he would continue until just the right moment for his indifference to still seem accidental and then over-apologize and tell me he didn't mean to hurt me. Other times, he wouldn't even bother to address my tears, pretending not to see me in pain. Outside the bedroom, he pushed boundaries too. One time, when riding on the back of his motorcycle, he drag-raced a car next to us. I yelled over and over through our motorcycle headsets to slow down until he finally did– much too late for me to feel okay, but soon enough to where I was able to forgive him. Seeing me uncomfortable or in pain was not only intentional, but it gave him pleasure.

When I was approached by the two people who came forward that second week of December 2022, I learned that this “boyfriend” of mine had been in relationships with at least two other people during our 2+ year monogamous relationship, had gotten one person pregnant, and had multiple one-night stands, likely all unprotected. Not only that, he was also emotionally and sexually abusive towards them too. He told the other people the exact same lies that made me stick around– that our connection was unique, that we were the only people to fully understand each other, and that no one else shared the same bond that we did. Yet, Clifford repeatedly told me that he would only ever be honest with me, that he was 100%

committed to our relationship, and that he would be utterly destroyed without me in his life. Many times I tried to break up with him, but his relentless commitment to us always made me reconsider.

The same people who came forward about his abuse were those that Clifford and I had constant conflict over. He told me that Des (who he dated for four years, including a year of overlap during our monogamous relationship), was his closest friend. Yet, over a year into our relationship, I had only met them one time in an extremely brief interaction at the house. I consistently told Clifford that I wanted to befriend Des and expressed how sad and frustrated it made me that Des was being so cold to me. I didn't understand why a close friend would act like that. He finally "admitted" that he thought Des had unrequited love for him and so it was hard for them to see us together. Although I felt that Des had consistently disrespected our relationship, I somewhat empathized with that story and told myself that I understood the weirdness around it all. Then, sometime during our second year together, Clifford told me that I was banned from staying at his house due to Des not feeling comfortable with me being there. This of course didn't go over well, as I had barely even talked to them and could not fathom why *I* would be banned. Clifford promised to move out but eventually Des moved out and I tried to wipe them from my mind. Now, I know that everything that Clifford told me about them (and vice versa) was a complete lie meant to pit us against each other.

The second person who gave me a letter also inspired many conflicts throughout my relationship with Clifford. He told me they had become friends at the coffee shop he worked at but didn't really hang out outside of work, except for group settings. I sensed that something more was occurring, but he reassured me they were just friends, told me he had a frank conversation with them about being completely platonic, and listed all of the reasons that he would never be attracted to them. (This included the fact that they had just gotten out of high school at age 18. The truth is that they are actually in their mid-twenties). Having been cheated on before, Clifford and I convinced myself that I was just feeling jealous due to my past experiences, and that I needed to work on fully trusting my partner. I tried to ignore the fact that he was always incredibly secretive and defensive about his phone, blaming my own insecurities. Clifford reminded me that we could never have a strong relationship if I didn't trust him, writing in an email: "I understand that me being a private person brings up feelings of secrecy but I do need to feel that I am building trust with you especially when I haven't done things to betray that trust." The truth was, he was involved with this person for over a year, got them pregnant, told them he loved them, took them on our same "cute" dates we went on, coerced them into buying the same products that he pushed me to buy, abused them, and used the same manipulation tactics on us both. I later learned that Clifford also told this other person that he thought my "instability was hot". He told them that he was attracted to how "crazy" and "unstable" I was, all while purposely emotionally abusing and manipulating me for his pleasure.

To further my point on how pervasive lies are in Clifford's world, take this summer for example. I lived with Clifford in Tucson for three months in summer 2022. We rented a friend's apartment and I would work from home while he worked at the coffee shop. During this time, (I later learned), he would wake me up in the mornings to have sex, go to the coffee shop and have sex with his other partner there, come back for lunch and have sex with me, leave to do "chores" while I was still working and show up at their apartment around 2-3pm to have sex with them again, then come back home and have a nice sex-filled evening with me. Not only that, but during the same time, he told everyone at the coffee shop that I was stalking him. On my end, he was constantly asking me to come visit him at work so he could make me

drinks. When I showed up, he would come outside on the patio to talk to me, have a seemingly normal conversation, and then apparently go inside and fake cry to his other partner that I refused to leave and that I had come all the way from Denver to intimidate him. The other person had no idea I was even in town, let alone living with him.

Clifford also told his other partner that I “emasculated him,” shaming him for not making enough money while forcing him to pay for most of our shared bills. Meanwhile, I was actually funding most of his trips to Denver, paying a majority of our grocery bills, paying for our rented Tucson summer apartment on top of my Denver apartment, sponsoring trips we took together, and being pressured to spend money when I didn’t want to. I also bought many expensive gifts for him and planned on paying for the majority of our upcoming lease. On the other hand, he told his other partner that he was going hungry with me and how traumatizing it was due to food insecurity issues from childhood. The reality was that I was providing 2-3 meals per day while he was simultaneously being fed by his other partner 2-3 times per day. (Apparently he gained 15 pounds this summer).

As I’m writing this, the amount of manipulation, deceit, and abuse seems so ridiculously insane, yet he was able to trap me and convince me that I loved him for almost three years. I now understand that it wasn’t love, but it was him grooming me to believe that I was in a real partnership so that he could extract the perks: sex, financial assistance, travel, housing, love, etc. I know reading this you may think that I am incredibly gullible or foolish. In truth, I have always been at the top of my class, I received a full ride to graduate school, and I have excelled in my career. In addition, I have always felt that something was wrong with Clifford and never fully trusted him. I had a gut feeling about every single person that I now know he had sex with while we were together. Yet, his overwhelming amount of lies and ability to construct a completely different reality was too powerful. I seriously believe this person has spent his life studying and observing people to master how to craft the perfect character to attract his victims. He has learned to impeccably perceive a person’s vulnerabilities, present himself as a non-judgemental source of support, then slowly and psychotically manipulate that person’s vulnerabilities to bring them under his control. Clifford Ludena is a dangerous person and I truly hope he does not steal one more second of someone’s precious life.