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'Laura has done again what she does best: gone there, all the way, to the darkest corners and brought all the research, anecdotes and interviews to the surface for us all to see. This is how change is made: by looking at uncomfortable things directly in the eye and not turning away.' Emma Gannon

'Laura Bates has written a fearless and unflinching account of how the most prevalent human rights abuse on the planet, the mistreatment of women and girls at the hands of men, is being given new energy and reach through contemporary technologies and the strategies of extremism. This is a vital and urgent book, detailing not just the growing threat of extreme misogyny and the mainstreaming of its message but also how through allowing this to happen we are exposing girls and women to increasing levels of danger and abandoning countless boys and men to the coruscating damage of its influence.' Owen Sheers

'A book that is a challenging and sobering read but also brave, meticulously researched – and vital to anyone serious about tackling misogyny.' Anna James

'Laura has taken on a critical issue, one that society can no longer afford to overlook or trivialize: the reality of misogynistic extremism and the central role it plays today in family and social breakdowns, proliferating hate, terroristic violence, and political instability.' Soraya Chemaly

'If you only buy one book this month, then may we recommend Laura Bates' *Men Who Hate Women*.' *Stylist*

'The killing of women because we are women is not only the most common crime in the world, it is also the single biggest indicator of whether a nation is violent in its streets and will use violence against another nation.' Gloria Steinem

ALSO BY LAURA BATES

Everyday Sexism

Girl Up

Misogynation

The Burning

MEN WHO HATE WOMEN

THE EXTREMISM NOBODY
IS TALKING ABOUT

LAURA BATES

Sunday Times bestselling author and
founder of the Everyday Sexism Project



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leap out of the dank realms of the internet altogether, slithering offline, penetrating our pubs and sliding around street corners, twirling delicately up the wooden legs of kitchen tables, peeping into corridors of power, burrowing into institutions and workplaces, fanning out tendrils across talk shows and newsrooms, taking deeper and deeper root until they're part of the very fabric of our shared consciousness. Meaning that, eventually, when the shoots sprout, the fruits bud and the flowers bloom, their taste does not disgust us and their colours don't surprise us, because they are familiar and known. Even though their roots lurk in the very darkest depths, and the same poison drips through the entire network of veins.

I

MEN WHO HATE WOMEN

'Since they deserve to [be] raped, I cannot concern myself with the pain rape causes them.'

Comment on an incel forum

Most people have never heard of incels. The average person who asks me what I'm working on as I write this book raises an eyebrow and asks 'in-what?' One person thinks they're a type of battery. Someone else expresses their surprise that I'm interested in microbiology. The people incels walk past on the street don't generally know that they even exist.

That's why, when incels do occasionally crop up in news reports or conversations, they are so easily dismissed as a tiny fringe group of online weirdos. What you hear about them sounds so strange, so extreme, so hard to believe, so laughable even, that it is easy to shrug off. That's a mistake.

The incel community is the most violent corner of the so-called manosphere. It is a community devoted to violent hatred of women. A community that actively recruits members who might have very real problems and vulnerabilities, and tells them that women are the cause of all their woes. A community in whose name over 100 people, mostly women, have been murdered or injured in the past ten years. And it's a community you have probably never even heard of.

A year before I started writing this book, it wasn't a community

Alex had ever heard of either. Alex was a disillusioned young white man in his early twenties. He wasn't a hardened misogynist, just a bored guy surfing the internet. A bored guy with a vague awareness of people talking a lot about sexual harassment and the gender pay gap on the news, and an uneasy sense that maybe that wasn't great for him. Alex was twenty-four and had never had a girlfriend. He didn't have a lot of money and he felt frustrated and lonely. It didn't seem fair that people were complaining about women's needs when his lot in life, as a supposedly 'privileged' white guy, didn't seem so splendid. Alex didn't feel privileged at all, so it annoyed him when people said that he was. He spent nights browsing YouTube and bodybuilding sites, looking for tips on how to improve his looks. He discussed tactics in online forums dedicated to video games. He'd never come across the incel community until I did. But that's not surprising really, because I made him up, although there are countless real people like Alex online.

Under this identity, I came across an incel conversation one day on a generic message board. The idea of other men who felt similarly empty and frustrated appealed to Alex. He liked the idea of being one of many, instead of the odd one out. He felt relieved to have the chance to discuss the feelings he sensed were unacceptable to voice anywhere else. So he visited some of the communities that were mentioned in the conversation he had stumbled across.

When Alex first joined an incel forum, he didn't know much about it, except that it was a community of men who were unhappy being single. Alex was, too. He posted a couple of pretty tame introductory messages, giving basic information about his age, single status and frustration with women. Within a day, he'd been indoctrinated into the 'truth'. Told that the world was stacked against men like him. Advised that he might as well kill himself, that his life wasn't worth living, that nothing would ever change. Extreme and pornographic images were used in response to his posts. Other users were quick to tell him that his whole existence had been a lie: society had tricked him into believing men were in

control, when really they were at the bottom of the food chain. It was women who were privileged, who held all the cards and who were given all the advantages. Men were the true victims. Above all, he was told, over and over again, women are the devil.

Initially, Alex felt confused, then intrigued, then angry. How was it possible that this was the world he had been living in his whole life without even knowing? But then Alex looked at his own experiences and it started to make sense. It was appealing; until that point, he'd pictured himself as an underwhelming, very average man. But now he realised that he was a survivor. Part of a team of underdogs, fighting evil forces against the odds. Alex could be a wronged, avenging hero. This was a much more attractive version of himself than his previous reality.

After that, Alex didn't say much. He was a lurker. Like millions of other people on online platforms, his account appeared dormant as he just watched, listened and absorbed. He saw a six-point thread titled 'Why I support the legalisation of rape'. At first, he was bewildered and a little overwhelmed by the messages on the thread. But they were persuasive. They used facts and historical examples to back up their case. It was seductive: a world in which nothing was his fault, in which he was an aggrieved martyr, not the privileged loser he felt society painted him as. Most of all, it was a community. Yes, some of the posts were extreme, some of the replies were hostile and mean. But they treated him like a compatriot. Against the man-hating world they portrayed, he was their brother-in-arms. He was one of them, with a cause to believe in and an enemy to fight. Over time, it became easier and easier to see that women really were the enemy. When he had doubts, the messages he read reminded him that he had been deliberately blinded by the female-centric conspiracy designed to keep men docile and passive. He'd been tricked into allowing himself to be downtrodden and discriminated against. There were thousands of men who all believed the same thing. He quickly became a member of more and more forums, joining

Facebook groups and private chatrooms, watching video after video on YouTube, and learning more and more. Every single day, he saw hundreds of messages like this: 'I hate all women. They're the scum of the earth. If you're a woman and you happen to be reading this – I hate you fucking whore.' Or this: 'Women are disgusting vile parasites.' The more he saw, the less extreme it seemed. Eventually, the ideas became normal. And I watched it all through his eyes, feeling physically sick.

In the mid-1990s, long before the advent of dating apps, Facebook or even MySpace, a young Canadian woman, known only as Alana, started a simple website.

Alana was in her mid-twenties and struggling to find love. Hurt by 'lonely virgin' jokes and convinced that she couldn't be the only one feeling this way, she started a mailing list and began posting articles to the website she called Alana's Involuntary Celibacy Project.

Over time, the project grew into a small and generally supportive online community, where men and women shared their fears, frustrations and unhappiness.

Gradually, Alana started having more success with dating and drifted away from the community she had started, no longer wanting to focus on her former lack of romantic success.

Over twenty years later, the little project Alana called 'invcls' (a portmanteau of 'involuntarily celibate') has morphed into something completely unrecognisable. What started out as a small support group has mutated into a nightmarish world inhabited – or so a significant proportion of its content would suggest – by men who hate women. Alana would later tell a *Guardian* journalist: 'It feels like being the scientist who figured out nuclear fission and then discovers it's being used as a weapon for war.'¹

Now known as 'incels', the community consists of a sprawling network of websites, blogs, forums, podcasts, YouTube channels and chatrooms. The growth of the movement has, in part, coincided with the widespread adoption of the internet, but it has also seen a marked expansion over the past five to ten years, alongside

a similar increase in the popularity and visibility of a progressive feminist movement, particularly in Europe and North America. Almost cultish in its development of a vehemently misogynistic ideology, this hydra-like incel subculture has spawned a detailed, often delusional and violently anti-feminist worldview.

New recruits find the incel community in a variety of ways. Some stumble across it while looking for answers to life problems or loneliness. Some segue into its path from other areas of the internet, like more general message boards or websites. Some are pushed towards it by algorithms, with video platforms such as YouTube recommending incel content, even though the user didn't go looking for it. Some are sucked in through more sinister means, groomed by messages in private gaming chatrooms or on forums frequented by teenage boys. We'll look at some of these routes in more detail later. But, however you find the incel community, your first initiation – in common with many other manosphere communities – is taking the 'red pill'.

Borrowed from cult film *The Matrix*, this refers to the scene in which the protagonist, Neo, is offered a choice between taking a blue pill, which will enable him to continue seeing the world around him the way he always has, or a red pill, which will suddenly shift his perspective, enabling him to see the 'Matrix' and, in so doing, realise that nothing in his world is as he had thought. It's ironic that I feel a little bit like I have taken a red pill after writing this book. Once you know that there are hundreds of thousands of people out there despising women to the point that many of them believe we should all be exterminated, you can never un-know it.

Incels use the metaphor of the red pill to describe the moment a man's blinkers fall away and he suddenly realises that he has been lied to his whole life. The world that he has been forced to believe works in his favour is actually hopelessly stacked against him. Everything, from our government to our wider society, is designed to promote women over men. The myth of male privilege, so the story goes, is perpetuated by a massive feminist

conspiracy. Incels refer to this man-hating world as a 'gynocracy', a clever system designed to keep men (the true victims of oppression) in their subordinate place, without them even noticing.

The 'red pill' metaphor is a powerful and dramatic way of conveying an ideology, and it is immediately attractive to those with any kind of grudge or grievance. Lost your job? What could be more appealing than a whole new worldview in which it isn't your fault: you've just been the victim of a power grab by women and minorities. Dumped or divorced? That lying bitch is part of a much bigger attack on you and other men like you. Angry that you don't seem to be lucky in love? It's not you, it's her. Every single 'her', in fact.

Some of these are individual complaints, but many of them tap into wider forms of malaise that particularly affect men and boys. The burgeoning feminist movement is often seen as a threat. Our recent societal focus on equality is deliberately interpreted and framed by anti-feminists as a criticism of all men, and the communities explored in this book spread the idea that there is no acceptable way to be masculine any more. For many 'good' men and boys, this can create a sense of injustice and attack, prompting a defensive knee-jerk reaction. And, when you feel defensive, the first place you want to run to is somewhere you'll be told it's not your fault. The manosphere goes one step further: it subverts the narrative of the privileged and the victim altogether. It tells men that they are suffering, and it blames women.

Many men, of course, are suffering, and suffering deeply. The male suicide rate is around three times that of women; men are vastly less likely to receive support for mental health problems than women; and men, in particular, are hard hit by issues such as unemployment and workplace injuries, in a world that teaches them that it is their duty and role to be a provider and protector.

Here we see the crux of the manosphere itself – its complexity and its heartbreaking irony. As we will discover, this sprawling web of communities encompasses well-meaning groups that tackle genuine problems affecting men, not just groups

deliberately and systemically promoting physical and sexual violence against women. Its adherents range from naive teenagers to advocates of rape, vulnerable recluses to violent misogynists, non-violent ideologues to grieving fathers, online harassers to offline stalkers, vocal propagandists to physical abusers. Clearly not every individual who has participated in this space is deserving of the same label or treatment; indeed, there may be a large cohort of these men and boys in desperate need of support. It is paradoxical, therefore, that the group at one end of the spectrum is responsible for the most acute harm done to the group at the other. Those most powerfully reinforcing rigid and patriarchal gender stereotypes are suffocating those who most need to escape them.

Superficial analyses of incel communities have sought to imply that class is the biggest factor driving new recruits to the cause: that this is about poor, white boys being left behind. Others have suggested that it is a specific response to shifting labour markets, as manual jobs become increasingly scarce, and women are employed in ever greater numbers in more powerful roles. But, in the time I have spent immersed in these conversations and message boards, it has become apparent that the socio-economic background of members is too diverse wholly to confirm any one of those theories. The membership of these groups spans from blue-collar workers, angry about immigrants 'displacing' them at work and in the bedroom, to highly privileged private school graduates, furious that their 'rightful' place at the top of the political food chain is being challenged.

What they do seem to have in common is a craving to belong. And this need is met in spades by a community that excels at conveying a tribal sense of cohesion. What better way to suck in new recruits and repel criticism than to borrow an origin story that immediately positions all acolytes as heroic, doomed visionaries, and all critics or disbelievers as either pitifully ignorant or part of the oppressive system itself? (The fact that the *Matrix* trilogy was created by two transgender women, or that its kick-ass female characters would