

WHAT ELSE MIGHT BE TRUE?

BOOK 4

The Honest Unknown

Seeing patterns without pretending to know another mind

Pocket Field Guides for Being Human

A reflective series

Before You Begin

This book offers ways of seeing, not diagnoses of other people. A behaviour can support several explanations without proving any one of them. Use these pages first as a mirror, then as a way to ask clearer questions.

When there are threats, violence, sexual pressure, stalking, coercion, exploitation, a suicide concern or immediate danger, protection comes before interpretation. If someone is in immediate danger or needs urgent medical help, call your local emergency telephone number. You do not need a complete explanation before seeking help.

This is a reflective guide, not legal, medical or clinical advice. Your age, location, relationships and access to support may change what a safe next step looks like.

About This Book

Psychological language can create understanding. It can also create a new form of certainty. Once we learn words such as jealousy, avoidance, insecurity, trauma, control, projection or attachment, it becomes tempting to use them as invisible verdicts.

The Honest Unknown is the safeguard within this series. It asks how to notice patterns without turning possibilities into diagnoses, how to take intuition seriously without making it infallible, and how to remain open to evidence that unsettles the story we prefer.

The goal is not permanent doubt. It is responsible confidence: enough clarity to act when needed, enough humility to revise, and enough care not to imprison another person inside an explanation they never had the chance to answer.

How to Use It

Read the chapters in order when you can. The book moves from separating fact and inference, through safety, patterns, questions, perspective and power, toward the honest use of uncertainty.

When a situation is ordinary and reasonably safe, the central question is: What else might be true? When the situation involves danger, coercion or severe power imbalance, the more urgent question is: What is clear enough for protection now?

Return later. The same event may look different when emotion has settled, new evidence has appeared or a pattern has become clearer.

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What Happened, What I Felt, What I Inferred

Facts, feelings and explanations often arrive together. They are not the same thing.

A small situation

During a group project, Sam writes in the chat: "You always take over. I am not doing this again." You ask what they mean. Sam does not answer before school ends, and at lunch they sit with another group.

You feel embarrassed, angry and excluded. By the bus stop, you are thinking: Sam has been complaining about me and wants the others to turn against me.

Separate the layers

The message is known. Your reply is known. Sam did not answer before school ended. Sam sat elsewhere at lunch. Your embarrassment and anger are also known because they are your experience.

The idea that Sam has been talking about you is an inference. It may be accurate. It may also be shaped by the shock of the message, by earlier experiences of exclusion, or by information you do not yet have.

A feeling tells you how the event landed. It does not, by itself, establish another person's motive.

What else may be true

Sam may be distancing themselves and may have discussed the conflict with other people. Sam may also have a specific complaint about how decisions were made, but expressed it as a broad verdict. The unanswered message may carry no extra meaning. Sitting elsewhere may be connected to the conflict, or it may not.

Calling a judgment "truth" can give the speaker enormous authority. A fair claim must leave room for context, questions and the possibility of error.

A useful next step

Write three lines: "What happened...", "What I felt...", and "What I currently infer..." Then ask what evidence would make the inference stronger, weaker or wrong.

If the situation is reasonably safe, one concrete question may help: "When you said I take over, what did I do in this project?" Examine the complaint without accepting "always" as a complete description of your character.

Where power, danger or retaliation is present, do not test the inference through confrontation. Seek informed support instead. Uncertainty about motive does not cancel observed conduct, impact, boundaries or the need for help.

What happened is one question. What it means is another.

Safety Before Explanation

Protection does not require a complete theory of the person who may be causing harm.

SAFETY FIRST

If someone is in immediate danger or needs urgent medical help, call your local emergency telephone number.

Protection does not have to wait for certainty about motive.

You do not have to confront, privately investigate, diagnose or prove an offence before seeking help.

If a device may be monitored, calls, messages, browsing, bills or account activity may leave traces.

A small situation

Riley has shared phone location with Alex, who Riley is dating. After an argument, Riley ends the sharing. Alex writes: "Turn it back on. I know where you are." Then: "Do not make me come there." Riley does not know how Alex knew, whether Alex will arrive or what Alex would do.

The missing information matters, but it does not erase the demand and threat already received. The observable sequence is enough to take protection seriously.

Safety is about conduct before motive

Not every relationship disagreement has the same urgency. Ordinary conflict can involve disappointment, anger and requests for space. Safety concerns become more serious when there are threats, violence, repeated monitoring, unwanted tracking, pressured access, severe intimidation, sexual pressure, control over movement or essential support, or credible retaliation.

A relationship or an earlier choice to share does not by itself make continued access acceptable. Sexual or bodily consent must be freely given

and can be ended. A previous agreement or previous activity does not establish present consent.

A useful next step

If immediate danger is present, move towards other people or a safer place only if doing so does not increase the risk. Describe the concrete conduct rather than trying to supply a diagnosis or complete motive.

If you cannot safely use your own device or usual helper, use another available route only where that does not increase risk. Where time allows, ask what can be kept private, what may be shared or recorded and what happens next. Do not delay urgent safety information for an answer. Share only what is needed for the immediate safety or practical question, unless urgent circumstances require more.

Do not access another person's accounts, stage a test, recruit people to investigate or build a private case file. Technical actions such as changing passwords, turning off tracking, blocking or collecting evidence need current, situation-specific guidance because the same action can help in one situation and increase risk in another.

Suicide concerns

A threat of self-harm or suicide should be treated as a suicide concern and transferred according to urgency. If someone is in immediate danger, call your local emergency telephone number. Otherwise involve an appropriate adult, crisis or health service. Do not promise secrecy or take sole responsibility for assessing and managing another person's suicide risk.

Taking a threat seriously does not require a young person to remain in a relationship or personally become the crisis responder.

When not to use this chapter

Do not use safety language to punish ordinary disagreement or publicly label another person. Protection can begin without a complete explanation, but it should remain proportionate to the conduct, urgency and vulnerability involved.

Protection does not have to wait for certainty about motive.

Patterns, Exceptions, and Evidence

Humility does not require pretending repeated conduct means nothing.

A small situation

Amira and Kai agreed to alternate bringing a camera and uploading footage for a school project. Across five weeks, Kai misses two uploads and cancels two sessions. One cancellation involves an ill younger sibling. After apologising for another missed upload, Kai completes the next task on time. The project is due on Monday.

Amira is thinking: Kai never follows through. I cannot trust them with anything.

Count carefully

A useful pattern includes the agreement, dates, specific events and practical consequences. It also includes information that does not support the first conclusion: kept commitments, changed circumstances, apologies, repair and uncertainty.

The pattern may be strong enough to change what Amira relies on for this project. It is not automatically a verdict about Kai in every setting or for all time.

What evidence can and cannot do

A record is partial. Messages show the messages they contain, not everything that happened. A trustworthy account marks uncertainty and does not quietly remove contrary evidence.

Recording your own experience is different from checking another person's device, location or private messages. Do not stage failures, recruit observers, collect rumours or build a dossier. Those actions create new conduct rather than simply describing what occurred.

A useful next step

Describe the pattern without adjectives: what was agreed, what occurred, when it occurred and what followed. Ask a practical question no larger than the evidence: "Can I rely on this upload before Monday?" is narrower than "Is Kai an unreliable person?"

Amira may make a backup plan, divide the remaining tasks or ask what fair school process applies. The action should respond to demonstrated impact, not become punishment or a public character judgment.

The severe-incident exception

Patterns matter, but one serious incident can be enough for protection. Threats, violence, sexual pressure, stalking, dangerous conduct or credible retaliation do not have to repeat before Safety Before Explanation applies.

A pattern can support a practical decision without becoming a verdict on a whole person.

One serious incident may require protection without waiting for a pattern.

Acting Under Uncertainty

A decision can be necessary before the story is complete.

A small situation

The night before an assessment, Jonah receives a cropped screenshot that appears to show another student sharing exam questions. The date, earlier messages and original account are missing. A friend tells Jonah to post it in the year-level group before everything is deleted.

Doing nothing may matter if the material is genuine. Posting publicly could humiliate someone and affect discipline, friendships and reputation before the screenshot is understood.

Make the trade-offs visible

Ask: How urgent is the possible harm? Who may be affected? What information is actually available? What can be reversed? Does the proposed action seek protection or review, or does it accuse, punish or expose?

These questions are not a machine for producing one correct answer. They stop pressure, fear and urgency from hiding the consequences of both action and inaction.

Process is not punishment

A private request for process information or review is different from making a formal allegation, circulating material publicly, investigating privately or imposing punishment.

The greater and less reversible the consequence, the stronger the reasons and procedural safeguards should be. This is not a legal formula. It is a reminder that public exposure carries different consequences from quietly asking what responsible process exists.

A useful next step

Jonah can state the limits plainly: "I received a cropped screenshot. I cannot verify the date, the full conversation or whether it shows the actual assessment." He may privately ask what process applies and avoid altering or widely circulating the material.

He is not responsible for determining what happened. He should not search devices, enter accounts, ask others to obtain private messages or collect more private material. If the information indicates immediate danger rather than academic misconduct, Safety Before Explanation takes priority.

A private, limited step is different from a public verdict.

When Asking Helps - and When It Does Not

A direct question can replace hours of private certainty, but not every question is safe, fair or useful.

A small situation

Nadia and Finn have entered a school music showcase as a duo. After an argument about the set list, Finn cancels rehearsal and says, "I need a bit of space." The final form is due Wednesday, and Nadia must register either as part of the duo or as a solo performer.

Nadia is thinking: Finn is avoiding me and has already decided to pull out.

Four checks before asking

First, is it reasonably safe? Second, is the question relevant to a shared decision, agreement or boundary? Third, can the person reasonably answer it? Fourth, could the answer change what you do?

For Nadia, "Are you still planning to perform with me, or should I submit the solo form?" is concrete and useful. "Why are you punishing me?" is an accusation shaped like a question.

A question is not access

Being in a relationship, or asking a question, does not make another person's private accounts, messages, device or immediate disclosure yours to demand. Ask only for information relevant to the present practical decision. Asking does not justify proof demands, interrogation or repeated pressure until the answer changes.

Silence, delay, discomfort or defensiveness may affect your decision. They do not prove guilt, dishonesty or a hidden motive. Sometimes the available answer is incomplete, and the deadline still requires a choice.

A useful next step

Complete one sentence: "The answer could change my decision by..." If no realistic answer would change the decision, the question may be seeking reassurance, confession or access rather than information.

Ask one clear question and state any real deadline without manufacturing urgency. Compare promises with later conduct without treating either words or conduct as direct access to hidden motive.

When not to ask directly

Direct conversation is not the default where there is danger, coercion, retaliation, severe power imbalance or a serious allegation. An older partner, teacher, coach, employer, clinician, religious leader or socially dominant peer may hold power that makes a private question unsafe or uninformative. In those situations, move to Safety Before Explanation or Finding the Right Second Perspective.

Ask for information you can use, not a confession you are owed.

Finding the Right Second Perspective

A second set of eyes can widen reality, but only when the perspective fits the question.

A small situation

Mina is hard of hearing and works weekend shifts at a cinema. She has asked for roster changes to be sent by text because verbal changes in the foyer are difficult to follow. After she misses a shift that she says was changed only in conversation, the manager tells her, "If you need special arrangements, this job may not suit you." Two later shifts disappear from the roster.

A friend says the manager is discriminating and urges Mina to post online. A parent says she should apologise and avoid trouble. A teacher who helped her get the job knows the manager socially.

Begin with two questions

Is this person or service reasonably safe and sufficiently independent for this question?

What can they do, what may happen to the information, can they communicate accessibly and what happens next?

Match the help to the task

A friend can listen and help organise events. Communication support can help information move clearly. An advocate may help a person be heard. A lawyer can advise on law. A crisis service responds to urgent risk. One role does not automatically perform all the others.

A title does not guarantee independence. Ask what the person's role is, who selected them, what information they may receive and whether they are connected to the people or organisation involved.

Access and agency

Ask for information and communication in a form you can access and understand. This may mean receiving it in writing or another available format. A communication difference does not determine whether an account is reliable or whether the person can decide what to do next.

Support should help a person understand, communicate and direct their own decision rather than automatically replacing it.

A useful next step

Mina can describe the comment, the roster changes, her earlier request and the limits of what she knows. Those facts are enough to seek information about workplace and access options. They do not, by themselves, settle whether unlawful discrimination occurred.

Where the expected helper is involved or unsafe, ask what appropriately independent route exists. Where time and safety permit, ask what can be kept private, what may be shared or reported, what records may be created and what happens next. Do not assume confidentiality or a particular outcome.

Choose the perspective for the question, not the verdict you hope to hear.

Missing Context: Silence, Tone, Volume, and Humour

A communication cue can show what happened in an exchange without explaining the whole person.

A small situation

During theatre rehearsal, Leila begins explaining why a pause should be longer. Mason speaks before she finishes and later raises his voice over her again. Leila stops contributing.

The interruption, increased volume and Leila's withdrawal are observable. They show that she was not given room to finish. They do not establish why Mason spoke that way or what the exchange says about his complete character.

Missing context is not a diagnosis list

Mason may have felt rushed, misunderstood the turn-taking, been excited, been used to a louder style or simply dismissed Leila's contribution. The chapter does not need to rank these explanations. None of them changes the fact that Leila was repeatedly interrupted.

Alternative explanations should widen the field of possibility, not become a hidden checklist of conditions or identities.

Silence

Silence may be space, thought, exhaustion, fear, avoidance, anger, punishment or lack of interest. Its meaning becomes clearer through context: Was space requested? Was a return time given? Does the person return? Does silence repeatedly end only when someone submits?

Ask once where it is safe and useful. Then observe the longer pattern rather than filling every quiet space with your own fear.

Tone and humour

Tone in a message is often underdetermined. A short reply may be cold, hurried, tired or simply brief. A recurring joke may carry concern, test a boundary, injure someone or merely repeat what gets a laugh.

Address the impact you can observe: "I keep losing my place when I am interrupted." "That joke keeps landing badly for me." You do not need to prove a hidden wound, confession or insecurity before asking for a different exchange.

Name the cue and its impact before claiming the cause.

Power, Impact, and Repeated Conduct

Power changes what disagreement can cost. It does not reveal a complete motive.

A small situation

Keira plays in a school netball team. Her coach controls selection, travel and recommendations. Keira relies on the school minibus after training. When she says she cannot stay for an unannounced extra drill, the coach replies, "Players who leave early cannot expect court time." Later, after asking again about finish times, Keira begins the next match on the bench.

There is contrary context. The coach has adjusted training for exams, the whole team had fewer substitutions at the last match, and future finish times were later confirmed.

Where the power sits

The coach controls opportunities Keira values and transport affects what she can realistically do. That makes disagreement more consequential for her. A request about finish times may be followed by less playing time or public criticism even when the connection between those events remains uncertain.

Power is concrete when it affects grades, selection, work, money, housing, transport, care, medication, reputation or access to a future opportunity.

What can and cannot be concluded

The sequence may justify asking about the selection process and another route. It does not, by itself, establish why the decision changed or whether a legal rule was broken.

A fair account includes exact words, dates, published times, playing time, repair and contrary evidence. It does not convert uncertainty into innocence, and it does not convert suspicion into a verdict.

A useful next step

Keep a brief factual chronology of information legitimately available to you. Do not secretly access accounts, stage tests, recruit people to build a case or conduct a private investigation.

Where the usual authority or complaint contact is involved or conflicted, ask what internal or external route may be sufficiently independent for the question. No route guarantees that retaliation will be prevented or that a complaint will produce a particular result. Where credible danger or abuse is present, Safety Before Explanation takes priority.

Unequal power changes the cost of conduct, not the limits of what we can know about motive.

Criticism, Autonomy, and Competing Values

A criticism can contain useful information, a harsh verdict, competing values and poor delivery at the same time.

A small situation

Lena has played cello in the school orchestra for five years. Six weeks before a festival, she is offered Saturday work at a bakery and a place in an after-school design course. She wants to leave orchestra at the end of the week.

Her mother says: "You are doing it again. We paid the festival fee, your section has planned around you, and you have not checked how you will get home from the course. You cannot call this independence and leave everyone else with the problem."

Separate the parts

The character verdict is "You are doing it again." The testable claims concern the fee, the festival date, replacement time and transport. The values include commitment, family money, education, paid work and Lena's growing authority over her own time.

The delivery may be shaming even if some practical concerns are real. Possible useful content does not require Lena to accept degrading treatment.

Do not solve criticism by guessing motive

Criticism may arise from care, fear, frustration, envy, habit, a sincere value or a practical consequence the listener has not considered. A dramatic psychological explanation is not automatically the deepest one.

Declaring every critic jealous or controlling can protect the self from learning. Treating every harsh statement as wisdom can erase autonomy and dignity. Neither response is discernment.

A useful next step

Check the claims that can be checked. Ask the orchestra director about notice and replacement. Confirm the fee, timetable and transport. Separate what Lena is free to choose from what she may still need to repair, repay, explain or plan.

A person can reject a character verdict while taking responsibility for consequences. Freedom is not obedience, and it is not exemption from impact.

You can reject a character verdict without pretending your choices have no consequences.

The Honest Unknown

Not knowing can be the most accurate position available, provided it is precise enough to guide the next step.

A small unresolved situation

Rae and a friend planned to buy adjacent concert tickets. Payment closes on Friday. The friend has not answered since Monday. Rae cannot afford to cover two tickets without repayment.

Rae does not know whether the friend still intends to go, why they have not replied or whether tickets will remain available. Those unknowns do not erase the deadline or Rae's financial limit.

Name the kind of uncertainty

A fact may be unknown. A motive may be unknown. A future outcome may be unknown. A value may be unsettled. These are different problems and do not all require the same kind of answer.

The best action may remain uncertain even when some boundaries are clear. Honest uncertainty does not postpone safety, responsibility, deadlines, impact or the need for help.

The four-part statement

Use four lines: "I know...", "I suspect...", "I do not know...", and "For now I will..."

Rae might write: "I know payment closes Friday and I cannot cover two tickets. I suspect my friend may have changed their mind. I do not know why they have not replied. For now I will send one clear message with the deadline and buy only my own ticket if there is no answer."

A useful next step

The next step should not depend on extracting an answer the other person has not chosen to provide. It should fit the facts already available, the practical boundary and the cost of waiting.

Later evidence may change Rae's understanding. Revision is not failure. It is what responsible confidence looks like when reality adds information.

What the honest unknown is not

It is not permanent hesitation, false balance or permission to ignore repeated harm. It is not a demand to invent sympathetic explanations for dangerous conduct. It is the discipline of saying exactly what remains open and exactly what is already clear enough for action.

What remains unknown does not cancel what is clear enough for the
next step.

Closing Note

Understanding people is not a contest in hidden-motive detection. It is a practice of observation, conversation, evidence, memory, empathy, boundaries and revision.

Sometimes a pattern becomes clear enough that you must act without perfect knowledge. Sometimes the courageous act is to ask another question. Sometimes it is to stop asking a person who has repeatedly shown you the practical answer through conduct. Sometimes protection must begin before explanation.

The question "What else might be true?" should widen reality. It should not excuse harm, erase impact or postpone the next necessary step.

A final five-question pause

- What happened, without interpretation?
- What am I feeling, and what does that feeling tell me about impact?
- What explanation am I adding?
- What else might be true?
- What is clear enough for the next safe and honest step?

The honest unknown is not the absence of guidance. It is guidance without pretence.