Case Summary 2

Background

"Ms. C" is a 35-year-old mother of a 7-year-old in a divorce and custody dispute.
She describes her spouse as emotionally abusive and unsafe for the child. She is seeking urgent legal intervention.
She alternates between deep gratitude for the attorney's advocacy and suspicion when suggestions do not fully align with her demands.

When describing her own parenting, Ms. C emphasizes her emotional bond with her child, portraying herself as fiercely protective and deeply attuned to her daughter's feelings. She recounts stories of late-night talks, special rituals, and her commitment to "shielding her from harm at all costs." She frames herself as the only person who truly understands the child.

When describing her estranged husband's parenting, Ms. C focuses on what she perceives as dangerous or neglectful behaviors – sometimes well-documented, other times based on her subjective interpretation. She describes his behavior as reckless, inattentive, or emotionally harmful, using strong language such as "unsafe" or "toxic."

Ms. C's attorney contacts and interviews third parties. Teacher report that Ms. C is very involved, sometimes to the point of being overly present at school, and that she expresses frequent concerns about the child's safety. Coaches note that she can be supportive but occasionally pulls the child from activities due to conflicts with other parents or scheduling disputes with her estranged husband. Neighbors describe her as devoted but intense, they report observing stress and tension during custody exchanges.

Behaviors and Relationship Dynamics

Ms. C's communications with her spouse are volatile, with alternating warmth and hostility. The following emails are by way of example:

1. "You said you'd be here at 3 p.m. for pickup and now it's 3:10. Clearly you don't care about our daughter. Don't even bother coming — she doesn't need this instability in her life."
2. "I keep thinking about how you used to say we were a team. Now you're tearing our family apart. Sometimes I wish you'd just disappear so she and I could be safe again."
3. "If you don't agree to my custody proposal, I'm going to make sure the court hears every horrible thing you've ever done. I won't let you hurt her anymore."
4. "I'm sorry I yelled yesterday. I was just scared you'd take her away from me. I know you probably think I'm overreacting, but you don't understand how much I'm hurting."
5. "Sometimes I think we could still be friends… maybe even more if you changed. But then you do something cold and it reminds me why I can't trust you."

Her co-parenting positions shift between encouraging and blocking contact, often based on momentary perceptions of safety or loyalty.

Communication Patterns with the Attorney/Custody Evaluator

Ms. C makes frequent, urgent contact outside of business hours.
She may express intense appreciation one day and deep mistrust the next.
When she feels connected to the attorney, she shares extensive details, including information that might weaken her case; when feeling suspicious, she withholds important facts.
She often pushes for emergency legal actions and tends to frame refusal as betrayal.

Feelings the Attorney May Experience During and After Interactions

- Feeling alternately valued and distrusted by the same client
- Anxiety about triggering client anger or withdrawal
- Emotional exhaustion from unpredictable mood shifts
- Pressure to act quickly without full preparation

Why These Feelings Matter

Clients such as Ms. C often create rapid shifts in the attorney's perceived role—from trusted ally to suspected adversary—based on perceived alignment.
This emotional whiplash is a hallmark of relational patterns.

Hot Tips for Attorneys

- Set and enforce communication boundaries.
- Document all advice and interactions.
- Avoid being drawn into extreme positions.
- Use written summaries after meetings.
- Build in cooling-off periods before major filings.

DSM-5 Criteria and Symptom Mapping

DSM-5 Criteria for Borderline Personality Disorder (must meet 5 or more):

1. Frantic efforts to avoid abandonment – Present (urgent contact, fear of betrayal).
2. Unstable, intense relationships – Present (idealization/devaluation of attorney and spouse).
3. Identity disturbance – Subtle (self-concept tied to custody outcome).
4. Impulsivity in potentially self-damaging areas – Present (pushing emergency filings).
5. Recurrent suicidal behavior/self-harm – Not documented here.
6. Affective instability – Present (rapid mood changes).
7. Chronic feelings of emptiness – Not explicitly noted.
8. Inappropriate, intense anger – Present (accusatory communications).
9. Transient stress-related paranoia/dissociation – Subtle (suspicion attorney is "taking sides").

Discussion Notes: _____