

DOUBLE DOWN Excerpt – Meet Maddie Larsson

[Security at the Tom Tom Casino has just removed card counters...]

The group shuffled away and Maddie glanced at the remaining players. Fascinated shock splayed across the woman's features. The last guy rose, winked and slid a chip toward her. His behavior flashed across her mind as he moved in the opposite direction from security. Purposeful but discrete, he walked with the same under-the-radar style he'd displayed at the gaming table. Now that she thought about it, he'd been counting cards as well, but using the more obvious, inexperienced guys for cover. She turned to signal security, glanced back, but the guy was already gone.

"Well. That was different." The woman gathered her chips and also slid one forward for Maddie. "I think I'll call it a night."

Maddie smiled her thanks while scanning the casino for possible players. Having the entire table empty wasn't the way to attract people. It screamed both "problem" and "cold table."

The gamblers at the surrounding tables turned back to their cards, as if the scene were part of the evening entertainment. The other dealers kept their focus on their own tables. She wasn't sure if it was deliberately distancing themselves from a train wreck or making sure their own charges weren't cheating.

An empty table.

Keeping a warm smile pasted on her lips, she let her eyes drift over the crowd, looking for the pit boss. It was almost time for her break. She could use the rotation of dealers as a way to attract a new group of gamblers afterward. Just as she located the pit boss, a man dropped into one of the chairs.

"Daniel." The warmth in her voice was real. The old man came into the casino often and always sat at her table.

He dropped some cash on the table.

Maddie tucked the currency into the drop box and pulled chips from the rack. As Daniel Kaufman place his first bet, she automatically slid two cards across the table and dealt her own.

A two and a ten for Daniel. She had a five showing. Her hole card was probably a face card. Not that she was counting or anything.

Daniel's lucky charm appeared—a World Poker Tour championship chip. A nick marred the bold blue border surrounding the tour's logo. A chip in the chip. Her smile broadened. An image of Daniel clenching the disc in his teeth, testing it like gold, immediately surfaced. One day she'd ask him how he'd damaged it.

He rolled the chip across his knuckles like a coin, then tapped the uppermost card. "Hit me."

A five joined the twelve he had showing. With a laugh, he waved her off. "What do you have?"

She flipped over a queen to pair with her five, and then threw a seven to bust. She slid chips to Daniel and cleared the table. "You okay? What did you do to your eye?" A yellowing bruise marred the left side of his face.

Daniel sighed and looked away. His sigh ended in a deep cough, a rattling, rasping sound that would've made Maddie haul Caden into the pediatrician's office. With Daniel's cough, she would've called it a smoker's cough—they still had too many smokers in the casino—except she knew Daniel didn't smoke.

"It's time for my break. I could use a soda. Come on. Join me." Maddie signaled the pit boss. A moment later, another dealer stepped up to the table.

Maddie led the way to the snack bar. Minutes later, they were seated at a small table tucked into the far corner of the lounge. "What happened?"

"Why can't that kid be more like his older brother? Or like you? Look at you. Working. Going to school and taking care of your son."

"This isn't about me. If you don't want to talk about it, that's fine."

He stared into his drink and swirled the scotch over the ice cubes.

She sipped her soda and waited, quietly studying the older man. Beyond the black eye, his color looked bad. Now that he was still, without the usual animation lighting his face, she noticed the fatigue and sheen of perspiration. "Is your insomnia kicking in?" teetered at the edge of her tongue.

"My youngest, Owen, hit me up for money again." The words were abrupt. He still wasn't looking at her.

She joined his wince at the word choice.

"I'd had it with him. Had a Come to Jesus session about working and responsibility." Daniel's fingers gingerly poked his face. "He didn't take it well."

"I'm sorry. Is that why you haven't been in this week?" Stress, she decided. It did bad things to your body.

Daniel nodded. “I had some decisions to make. About me. About the kids. The older three are fine. Ryan works hard. He’s got a good job, a nice place for his family. My daughter’s able to work part-time while her kids are in school. Her husband’s got a steady job. Same for Jeremy. So how in the hell did Owen end up such a slacker?”

Maddie shook her head. “Asher’s the same way. Always an excuse why something—a job, a class, you name it—wasn’t working for him. I made the mistake of pointing out the operative word was ‘work.’” “Asher had hauled off and hit her too. She should’ve throw him out then. Part of their divorce decree had been a restraining order that mandated he couldn’t see her—or Caden—unless he participated in AA. He’d been pretty consistent until last week when he’d fallen off the wagon. She rubbed the bruise on her forearm. It was still sore where he’d grabbed her when he showed up drunk last week.

“Yeah. It’s like the kid expects me to support his lazy ass instead of getting out there to earn his own.” Daniel took a long swallow of his drink, then carefully positioned the glass in the center of the napkin. “Look, I wouldn’t have said anything except...well...I made the mistake of using you as an example since he’s tired of hearing about ‘Saint Ryan.’ Owen made some...wild accusations.”

“About...?”

“You and me. Mostly you. I don’t think he’d do anything, but I wanted to warn you.”

“He threatened me? My job? My family? My *child*?” Her voice rose as outrage warred confusion.

“No, no, no.” Daniel made patting gestures with his hands. “Nothing like that. He.... He claimed you were ‘after’ me. That you were after my money.”

Heat flooded her cheeks. “I never—”

“I know you didn’t—you wouldn’t—but in case Owen shows up here looking for me. Says something.” He lifted one shoulder. “Causes a scene. I wanted you to be prepared.”

“How do you prepare for something like that?”