



Illusory refuge

Emma Calley

The moment Vincent stepped across the threshold of 49 Windsor Court, it was no longer. The sturdy foundations cracked and shattered under the weight of his presence. The glass of each window fractured, spewing shards across the carpet. The roof caved in and sent fragments of terracotta flying like missiles.

But the walls continued vertically. Floorboards aligned neatly.

It appeared functional to the blind eye.

The day Vincent entered our house, the walls stood defiant, mimicking his obnoxious mannerisms.

But it was no longer a home.

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A booming laugh alerts me to his return and sends bile sliding up my throat. I swallow, forcing myself to stay calm. For her. For us.

In, and out. In, and out.

A long breath exits my lungs, and I feel my shoulders slump under the punishing weight of denial. I debate leaving. Running. I picture myself creeping into the hallway closet and nestling in between rain jackets and umbrellas. Among dusty boxes of old family photographs and long-forgotten birthday cards. I shake my head, clearing the thought.

I am stronger than this. Stronger than fear. I take one step. And another.

I feel my legs moving me further down the hallway, closer to the husky, masculine voice. Further from the sanctity of my bedroom.

But I don't feel present. My mind is still sitting in bed, huddled under the warm blankets that adorn my mattress. It has locked the door and is refusing to come out and face reality.

I am like an elastic band being tugged and stretched in every direction; hanging on by a millimetre of rubber. Until ... snap.

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I round the corner, cracking my knuckles one by one, relishing the clicking sound and subsequent relief of tension.

Crack. Sigh. Crack. Breath.

I see his shoes first. Patent leather. Polished. Reflecting every light that dares to refract off its surface. If I was a stray rock or jutting corner, I would fear the approach of his feet.

The press in his pants appears so sharp I could file knives off it. Neatly tucked into his waistband is a carefully steamed blue shirt, complete with silver cufflinks. Everything screams corporate. Unapproachable.

But something catches my eye on his right wrist. A jagged scratch that worms its way from his index finger to the base of his thumb. It's raw and angry, as if it's been festering for several days without treatment. Or more likely, without acknowledgement. A wry smile creeps across my lips before I can suppress it.

I hear a sharp intake of breath. My mother. A warning.

'Laura.' He spits the word with a poison that would make even the toughest weed wither.

My face goes blank, wiped of any emotion. I feel my body shrink and my head follows, angling towards the floor and away from his piercing eyes.

In contrast, Vincent appears to grow a foot taller and widens his stance. If I were an onlooker, the mere sight of us both would make me chuckle. I wish I was a bystander. 'Vincent,' I somehow choke out between my swollen lump of a tongue.

My mother slinks back, angling her body away from him. Her gaze is darting between floors and walls and anything other than a second set of eyes.

The hostility is palpable. If it suddenly materialised into a living thing and slapped us both in the face, I wouldn't be surprised. Silence draws on and tension lingers like the thick smog that clings to city infrastructure with dependency.

'Do you have something you want to say to me?' There is no correct way to answer his question. Regardless, I feel the thread of defiance begin to weave its way through my thought processes before I can cut it off. It's fast enough to taint my safe response with sarcasm.

I open my mouth to satiate Vincent, but the rebellion leaves my lips before I even register making the decision to speak.

'Should I?' A bad decision. The worst. But seeing him physically shift at my words as if they possess a material force, only serves to empower me.

'Excuse me?'

'I think you heard me.' With every word, I feel myself growing bolder. Standing up taller. I straighten my shoulders and raise my head, but my eyes refuse to shift from the ground below me.

'How dare you,' he growls, taking a threatening step towards me. It takes every ounce of confidence I can muster to remain standing; my legs feel on the verge of collapse but I

hold strong. There's no use in allowing my insolence to waver now.

'I *smiled*. You may think you control our behaviours, but you don't get to control my expressions.'

I see his arm rear back to gain momentum before he is conscious of the movement.

Everything about his response is predictable and I am prepared.

'Don't,' I say with ferocity. My mother cries out, fearing the wrath of Vincent, but I am hyped on adrenaline. Nothing is going to stop me. I'm a car speeding down the autobahn, locked on cruise control. He snarls at me, narrowing his eyes in disgust. I am not afraid.

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His presence had been inexorable from the moment he shifted a box of belongings into my mother's bedroom. She shuffled her precious mementos into one corner of the room to rid Vincent of the 'clutter' that supposedly offended him. She laughed nervously when he chastised her for overcooking his vegetables. She never even hesitated when he asked her to resign. *You don't need a job Deanne*, he chastised with disdain, *I'm the one paying the bills*.

One by one, we began to shed any semblance of individuality and independence we once possessed. We were nestled so far into the palm of his hand that one wrong move would see us crushed in a fist-clench of rage. I begged for money, for freedom, for worth.

But most of all, I begged for gratification. For the affection I never felt.

In my pursuits for liberation, the risk was never worth the reward.

He ruled our household with a frightening confidence.

In his eyes, I was little more than an anatomically shaped obstacle blocking his path to total dominance. Despite this, I found it impossible to escape the finality of accepting Vincent into our kin. He never tried to ease into our family unit; he simply walked up to our doorstep and took a sledgehammer to its foundations. If doors were locked, he would open them. And just as he wasn't afraid to destroy our willpower and our happy existence, he never hesitated to torture me into subordination. I considered myself lucky in the scheme of things. Vincent worked his hardest to eradicate any sense of self-worth I possessed, but he never laid a hand on me. It was my mother who faced his physical force.

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As if hearing my thoughts, he says, 'You have no idea what you've gotten yourself into.' He rolls his neck around and I see his muscles shudder at the release of tension. The bile is working its way back up my throat, but not out of fear. Out of disgust.

'You're a sad man,' I barely whisper, grasping at every strand of courage in my peripheral.

'I beg your pardon?' he sounds affronted. My mother's jaw drops.

'You're a sad, sad individual. Picking on people weaker than you. Younger than you. Why don't you get a dog you can train and shout at?'

He lets out a shrill, single laugh; sounding almost hysterical in disbelief. 'You are my dog, Laura,' he taunts, 'woof woof.'

I lose it. Distantly, I hear my mother gasp; it's the first audible sound from her direction since she was about to be struck. She is smart. Or submissive. More so than I in either case.

My mind must still be snuggled in bed, because I am jumping on him, clawing. Grasping helplessly at any patch of bare skin. He is laughing at my attempt to harm. My mother is bawling beside us, screaming and pleading for us to stop. It's a raucous scene, as if we are a cackle of hyenas at the zoo, brawling over power in the clan.

I spy the scratch on his right hand and dive for it with my fingernails. He recoils in pain and reflexively releases his grip on my shoulder.

I have less than five seconds of freedom. I do not waste them.

Gripping my mother's arm, I tug her frantically toward the doorway.

She does not resist.

I hear him swearing close behind us.

I reach for the door handle, swinging it open violently and the taste of fresh air almost overwhelms me. I look left. Then right, surveying our options. Unsure if my mother is about to bolt back to the house, but praying she finds the strength necessary for survival.

I feel a hand on my shoulder, shoving me down the footpath. I swing around, thinking Vincent has caught up with us. But it is my mother.

Then, after registering the fear on each others faces, she grips my hand. And we run.