

## The Price to Pay

By Sophia Zeller

“You said you would stop,” she screams through her tears.

Shrieking with frustration, her voice cracks, and tears run down to her lips as I just watch silently, not knowing what to say to diffuse the situation.

“I believed you when you said you were getting better, but you were just lying to me,” she screams, shaking the envelope in my face. She tossed it into my lap, uttering her final words to me: “I hope the drugs comfort you, because I’m leaving.”

She storms out of the front door, slamming it shut behind her. I just sit frozen. Layla had gotten home and found the envelope before I could get to it, before the dealer messaged me it was on the porch. I told her I struggled with drug use before we met, and about three months into the relationship I relapsed. I told her it wouldn’t happen again, but it did. I am going to get better, I am, but just not right now, it’s too hard. I had been using without her knowing for six months and tonight she just happened to find out.

“You’re so stupid. You mess everything up,” I say to myself.

My head drops into my hand, and my closed fist repeatedly hits the side of my head. I am such an idiot. I messed things up with the one person I loved, all for the feeling of getting high. Hot tears start to run down my cheeks as I keep hitting myself.

“Stupid. Stupid. Stupid,” I repeat as I increase the force of my punches with each word.

I open my eyes, and through the tears, I blurrily see the envelope still lying in my lap. My frustration turns urgent. I rip open the envelope and out fly the three small baggies. I stomp into

my room to reach for the box inside the closet. Once a cigar box, it now holds the tools to take away the pain, the tools to make me feel numb and forget about the hurt. With the box I sit back in the living room and open one of the baggies, pouring a small amount of the yellow-tinged powder onto a spoon I altered with a pair of pliers a few months back. I grab a lighter and hold the flame under the spoon.

“Hurry up!” I screamed, needing the powder to melt down quicker.

I need my fix now. My body is shaking and feels like it is burning from the inside out. I just need it to melt, to release my pain.

After only a minute more of agonizing temptation, the powder turns into the liquid brown gold that will set me free. I fill my syringe and place it in my lap as I tie a shoelace around my bicep. I tie it tight, tight enough to find a bulging vein that can spread my pain-releaver through my body. I pierce my skin, but I don't worry about the pain, it will all be over soon. I shoot the drugs into my body. At first it hurts, feeling like my blood is boiling, but after a few seconds a feeling akin to the drop on a roller coaster occurs. My heart is racing, and I feel the rush. Slowly after, a numb sensation spreads over my body, making my entire body feel heavy. I close my eyes, and the pain is gone. The pain of losing Layla, the pain of my disappointment, it's gone. All I feel is bliss.

A few days pass. Maybe four or five but I can't be sure. The pain has been unbearable. It's not only the physical pain of withdrawal, but the emotional pain that I can't escape. I've been heavily using this past week. As soon as I start to feel myself coming down, I immediately shoot up again. It's the only way to keep me sane. A supply that should have lasted me almost a month only lasted a couple of days. I have to get more, and I have to get it now. But heroin isn't just

something you can ask your local neighborhood dealer for; you have to go digging for it. I've been using the "Onion" to find people who have it. The Onion is a private browser that lets people access the dark web and is untraceable in a search history and scan. When you log on, the possibilities are endless. The content provided ranges from the most innocent findings, like movies blocked in your country for free and counterfeit designer items, to the extremes of hiring hitmen, buying body parts, and sex trafficking. I only use the dark web to buy my drugs, though. I find a dealer who lives in the area and purchase directly through the website.

On the side bars of the purchasing website is what is comparable to ads. These ads just recommend products or services that are trending or that seem to match your browsing history. As my eyes flicker along the page, I notice an ad for a live stream.

"500,000 watching, HOT GIRLS SUBMISSIVE TORTURE."

I don't want to click on the page. Watching prostitutes being roughed around isn't my sort of thing. But something keeps drawing my eyes back to the ad. Something keeps pulling me back. I click on the link just to see what is happening on the stream and why so many people are watching.

On the screen is a lineup of women, all standing in focus on the camera. The camera is capturing their entire bodies, each girl wearing what resembles a child's training bra and plain underwear. The garments match, both a heathered grey, and tightly fitting to the women's bodies. The women all have rope tied around their ankles and are handcuffed with their arms in front of them, ball gags in their mouths. They all look very disheveled and dirty: dark colored bruising covering their arms and legs, black eyes, matted hair, and ribs showing. Painted on their stomachs are numbers in black.

“Who the hell would agree to this?” I ask myself.

Why are people putting themselves through this? A red bubble appears next to an icon of a chat bubble. I open the comments to see the profiles of older men commenting on how attractive the women are.

A notification comes in: “user39876: \$500 dollars donated. Let me see number 4 up close.”

A man in all black wearing a ski mask comes onto the screen, giving the woman with the number four on her stomach a nudge. She makes a small hop as her feet are tied together, then collapses from exhaustion. The man in black pulls her off the ground and walks off screen with her. A few moments later the camera turns to the left to show the woman sitting on a metal chair all alone in the corner of the room. The video zooms in, panning from the feet up, capturing a closer look at the woman. She is barefoot, and the soles of her feet are stained grey. Her legs are covered in greenish bruises, and one large scar sits above her left knee. She had cuts on her collarbone and chest, some which look as though they’re healing, others brighter red and fresh. Her eyes are swollen and bruised, with flecks of mascara smudged underneath, and she has blond hair that has been stained in some places by a sort of brown crust.

The comment section pings again: “user39876: \$1 dollar donated. Now let me see number 7.”

The man in black pulls the girl in the chair aside, and a couple moments later sits another girl down in the chair, pointing the camera to her feet before her face can be shown. This girl has smaller feet that aren’t as dirty as the last one. Her legs are covered in cuts, all too fresh to have started healing. Her belly button is pierced, but around her stomach are burn marks, looking like they were made by a cigarette or some small pointy object. The camera then pans to her shoulders

where there is a small tattoo of a bird. I look down at my own shoulder, exposed from the tank top I'm wearing and notice the same tattoo. My stomach drops like the downhill part of a roller coaster. My palms are shaking and begin to sweat as the camera pans up to the woman's face. There I see the dazzling green eyes, the pink lips, and pronounced cheek bones I fell in love with. Her eyes stare directly into the camera as though she is looking at me. It's Layla.

“user39876: \$500 dollars donated. Perfect. Let me see you pull three teeth and cut off the tip of her ear.”

My eyes widen. I can't watch this. I can't watch the love of my life be abused like this. This isn't prostitutes, this is real people.

The man in black turns the camera again to the left and now is facing what looks like a dentist's chair surrounded by a wall of flogs, whips, gags, knives, and hooks. The floor beneath the chair is stained a rust brown color. A bucket and mop lean in the corner, stained the same color. Layla is brought to the chair and strapped in, a restraint around each wrist, ankle, around her neck, and around her waist. Her gag is removed, and she begins screaming.

“HELP ME! SOMEBODY HELP ME!”

Her cries are blood curdling, her voice cracking and bubbling through the tears.

“user27695: \$5 dollars donated. She must be new. Watching her fight is pathetic.”

The man in black opens a drawer and pulls out a wooden stick and a pair of pliers. He grabs Layla as she is screaming, using one hand to force down her lower jaw and the other to force the stick vertically into her mouth. This way she can't shut her mouth even if she tries. He grabs the pliers and inserts them into her mouth. Although the view isn't clear, I know the first tooth is being

pulled when I hear the roaring come from her throat. Then the second comes, and the yell becomes more high pitched, and the sounds of crying begin. The last tooth is pulled and blood begins to drip from the side of her mouth, in streaks down her neck, finally dropping onto the training bra where it soaks in. The man in black comes close to the camera, presenting the teeth for the camera to see.

“user89546: \$100 dollars donated. How much for you to send me the teeth?”

“two thousand” the man in black types back.

“Contact me after to give shipping info,” he types as a follow up.

I feel a wave of nausea come over me and immediately reach for the trashcan under my desk. I throw up, shocked by what I’m reading. I felt guilty for watching, but I feel even more guilty that my first thought is ‘Now she can feel the pain I feel.’

I look back up at the screen and see the man in black holding a blade, inching it closer and closer to her ear. I hear the twang of the blade as he cleanly slices the tip of the ear off like a feral cat. Her screams cry out, raspier than before because of the strain on her voice. Her screams hurt me, but in the same way, I enjoy them. Now Layla will know how I feel. How I felt when she left. How I feel without the drugs. I make my donation so that I can comment in the chat.

“user78365: \$1 dollar donated. Make her eat it,” I said. I sat back, feeling appalled that I had just typed that out.

“A request like that is worth at least 500,” responds the man in black reading the screen”

“user78365: \$500 dollars donated. Fine, now do it.”

I couldn’t believe I just spent that much money. I shouldn’t be paying to watch this.

The man in black walks to Layla, screaming for her to open her mouth. At first, she refuses, but after the man in black holds up the blade, threatening to cut her again, she opens. He drops her ear in and tells her to chew. She slowly crunches down, bawling the moment her teeth touched the piece of her own ear. The man in black stands beside her, yelling at her to keep chewing unless she wants to be cut. She persists and in ten minutes she swallows the whole thing, crying in absolute agony.

I feel a rush go through me. I hate seeing Layla in pain, but I love having the power over her. Now she's mine. All mine. I want to see her beg for it to stop, but continue, nonetheless. Her screams are intoxicating, giving me a different kind of high than the drugs could ever give.

“user78365: \$300 dollars donated. Slash her stomach and have her paint her body in the blood”, I type out, my fingers dancing along the keyboard in wicked excitement.

The man in black nods at the screen, seeming impressed with this unusual request. He takes the same blade and with quick motion slices four times across Layla's stomach. The wounds turn pale and then began to pour blood, showing how deep the cuts really are. Layla tries to move, but the restraints on her wrists hold her down. The man in black then uses his hand and starts to move the blood down her legs and up to her arms and chest. Layla is covered in dark red but is beginning to turn extremely pale. She stops fighting, seeming to give up. Her eyes close, but her chest is still rising up and down.

My mind is racing, heart about to beat out of my chest. Watching her suffer, it's thrilling. I have to distance myself from the fact that it is Layla, but being able to have this undeniable power makes me feel untouchable.

Her chest is still rising, but I know the only way for me to finally have that release I'm looking for is to have her life in my hands. I make an offer with money I know I don't have.

“user78365: \$10,000 dollars donated. Kiss her and tell her you love her, then shoot her in the head,” I type out, cynically laughing as my fingers hit the keys.

The man in black starts to slowly clap, absolutely floored by the offer I made. He goes up to Layla, who still isn't moving and kisses her on the forehead.

“I love you number 7”, says the man.

He walks around to the side of her and pulls a small handgun out of the cabinets beside him. He loads one bullet into the gun. This is the moment. The moment I've been waiting for. She needs to hurt like I do. I grip onto my thighs, almost jumping out of my chair in anticipation when I step on something on the floor. I pick up the item and find a ring, the ring I gave Layla when I promised her I would always love her. She called it the promise ring. She must have thrown it with the envelope on the night we broke up. In that moment all the memories come flooding back. The restaurant dates, her playing with my hair on a Ferris wheel. Her telling me she loved me for the first time. I still love her. I look back at the screen, and the man in black is still loading the gun. I know I have to stop this. Killing her won't take away my pain. Having her back will take away my pain.

“user78365: \$1 dollar donated. DON'T SHOOT I CHANGED MY MIND”

The message sends and the ping is heard from the computer. I look up from the keyboard at the exact moment the gun is pointed to her temple, and a loud bang sounds from the speakers.