



Venom (La Douleur Folle #2)

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Category: Horror

Description: Masks are worn by those that seek to hide who they truly are.

I wear my real face day in and day out.

I'm never far away from those that need me.

I'm even closer to those that don't.

Is life truly worth living or do those want to kiss the sweet lips of Death deserve the release?

Those that do aren't worthy of being here.

Those that don't are my favorite games to play.

I've found a new pawn; one that believes everything and nothing all at once.

That existence is meaningless and fulfilling all at the same time.

The worst is yet to come.

Total Pages (Source): 26

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Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 1:23 pm

I rub my eyes tiredly as I drive home from La Douleur Folle, hoping that I don't smell like smoke or kindling of any kind.

Of course, when one spends time in the haven of the damned, the scent of the dearly departed tends to stick to the soul. But it's not a scent that I can take home with me.

I wouldn't want to kiss my little girl's forehead with the stench of death on my lips. I wouldn't want to shatter her dreams of being the best mommy in the world because of what I choose to do in my off time.

No, I like to live in my fantasy of having a normal life when I'm at home with her, and I refuse to demolish the little world that I created for my daughter.

The one where monsters really do hide in closets, lurk under beds, have long, drooling fangs, eyes that are as black as pitch, and breath that smells of sulfur.

The ones that all little children are afraid of.

The ones that don't look like me.

No matter how hard she makes it.

I cast a quick glance into the rear-view mirror as I continue to drive.

My tired, stark-blue eyes smiling back at me, the way they smile at each and every willing victim that walks into one of my rooms, are mocking me.

You're no mother of the year, they tell me—and while it may be true tonight, it's never true when I'm home with Shiloh.

I roll my left shoulder painfully as I finally turn onto my street and then into the driveway.

I know most women will fear coming home in the middle of the night alone, wondering if there's a monster of some kind lurking around the corner, ready to pounce.

However, in this story, I am the monster, and there's not a goddamn thing living or dead that strikes fear in me.

Not even the feral bitch who stares back at me from the distorted reflection of the frosted glass door to my home.

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I walk into my home, closing the door behind me as quietly as I can. I'm sure that by now the au pair is as sound asleep as Shiloh.

I won't wake up either.

Instead, I walk into the living room where the teenage girl is sleeping soundly—with one arm draped dramatically across her forehead, mouth slightly ajar—and I smile down at her.

But the smile only lasts a moment because as I tilt my head, I notice that something is off.

Shiloh, I think grimly as I narrow my eyes toward the edge of the blanket gently laying across Adriana's neck.

I briskly lean down and move it slightly—no more than an inch—then let it fall back against her skin.

A fire begins to kindle inside of me.

I don't understand why Shiloh can't do as she's told when I'm not here. I've gone over it so many times, teaching her how to treat others, and she still doesn't seem to grasp the concept.

I'll talk to her before I leave again tomorrow morning, I decide as I walk over to the small closet door in the living room.

Shrugging off my jacket, I loop the right sleeve through my purse strap before I reach for a hanger and secure both onto it.

Once I've closed the door, I run a hand back through my hair, smiling slightly at the smell of copper still coating my skin.

It enriches the very core of my being, and taunts it at the same time.

"Mm," I mumble tiredly as I finally decide to head toward my bedroom. I walk in, flip on the light, and close the door behind me before I begin to peel off my sticky clothing. I have to stop making the nights longer than they need to be, I tell myself as I make a neat pile of my garments.

Not for them—those who come to me deserve everything that I can afford them and more, but for myself. Playing the part of the dutiful mother and hostess to our au pair can be a little strenuous when I'm so damned tired.

Rubbing my face, I walk over to my dresser and pick out a pair of silk sleep shorts, a plain-white fitted t-shirt, and a pair of boy shorts. I cradle them against my chest before I walk back to my pile and pick it up. Holding it out in front of me, I march it straight across the hall to the bathroom. I use a foot to push up the lid of my hamper and drop the grotesqueries into it. Laying my fresh clothing on the now closed lid, I sit on the toilet for a moment to collect myself.

My body hunches forward as I reach down to touch the tips of my toes, stretching as best as I can, then let out a sigh.

Tonight is over.

The monsters are no longer whispering in their respective rooms, taunting their victims, giving them glorious endings.

If only they would allow my monster to rest.

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When I wake up the next morning, I feel groggy and sore from being draped crookedly across my bed.

Being what most would consider taller than the average woman isn't something to be admired, my arms and legs tend to ache if I don't take care in how I sleep.

I hear noises coming from downstairs and it irritates me. Any hope of going back to sleep is lost as Shiloh and the au pair talk in excited voices for what today could hold.

It's the au pair's day off, so I'll be taking Shiloh to the carnival that's visiting town. She's been begging me to go. Maybe it'll give me time to discuss our little problem together.

This problem isn't going to solve itself, and Shiloh needs to come to the party. She's ten years old, for crying out loud.

I slide out of bed and pad across the hall to relieve myself and brush my teeth. I set the toothbrush down with its cover on the bristle side face up. Everything should be just so.

I go back to the room and take out what I'm wearing for the day. I need to be comfortable because we'll do a lot of walking, so sweatpants and a T-shirt, and socks with trainers. I get dressed and fold my sleeping clothes into a neat pile and go place them in the hamper.

I make my way towards the kitchen as I hear Shiloh and the au pair singing little limericks. I plaster on a smile as I walk in.

“Good morning, Kerri, Shiloh.” I lean over and place a soft kiss on Shiloh’s head.

“Good morning, Mommy,” Shiloh says with a big smile. “Are we going to the carnival today?”

“Good morning, Esther,” Kerri says politely.

“Yes, we’re going to the carnival today. I promised I would take you,” I say, going to start the coffee machine as I notice Kerri hasn’t put it on yet. I take down a mug from where they are neatly stacked, and put it beside the coffee machine—straight, with the handle facing out.

I add sugar and creamer and then once the coffee is made; I fill it to just below the brim. I stir the delicious brew and rinse the spoon off before placing it in the dishwasher.

“Would you like some breakfast?” Kerri asks. “I’m making bacon and eggs.”

“That will be nice, thank you.”

Oh, how long will I have to keep this charade up? How long until Shiloh fulfills her destiny? How long until she’s a good girl?

I sit at the table with Shiloh, who is waiting for her breakfast as well. Kerri brings over two plates and sets them down. “If that’s all you need me for, I’ll be going.”

“Thank you, Kerri, that’s all.” I say.

Picking up my knife and fork, I start to cut into the bacon. Kerri has already cut up Shiloh’s breakfast for her. She’s a good au pair, which is why I hired her, but there’s more to it than that. She was to be Shiloh’s first.

Her introduction.

Her initiation.

I don't understand why she is delaying the inevitable.

Shiloh seems to sense my mood, and I realize I am no longer smiling. I smile again and stroke her face. "Eat your breakfast. We have much to discuss."

"I'm sorry, Mommy," she says quietly. "I couldn't..."

"We'll talk about it later. Now, what do you want to do first at the carnival?"

"Win prizes and go on rides," she says excitedly, her slight already forgotten,—the way only a child could forget things.

I nod and eat my breakfast neatly. Shiloh tries to mimic me, but I know once breakfast is over, she'll have to go change her shirt. We can't go out looking like we fed food to our clothes.

As predicted, Shiloh finishes breakfast and goes to change her shirt and put on her trainers. I grab my purse from where it's hanging in the closet and slip it over my shoulder before I pick up my car keys.

Shiloh comes dashing down the hallway and shrugs on her coat.

"You won't need that. It's warm today."

She shrugs it off again and carefully hangs it back up, straightening it out the way I like it. I stroke her hair gently and take her hand.

“Let’s go.”

I lead her to the car and strap her into her car seat before I climb into the driver’s side and strap myself in.

In no time, we are on our way to the carnival, and it reminds me of my own carnival.

La Douleur Folle

After all, what is it but a wild ride into an abyss of perfection. Those who come there have truly discovered themselves and know what they want, even if they beg for me to stop halfway through. Sometimes they start begging when I start. Some have not begged at all. Those are truly self-discovered.

This little pact we enter into, this deal... a deal the devil some might call it, it is sacred to me. I honor it with my own life. I give them what it is they need, and what they have come seeking for.

Just like Shiloh will. One day.

She just needs to understand, and I will help her understand that what I do is invaluable.

We arrive at the carnival, and I help Shiloh out of her seat. She takes my hand, and I lead her to the entrance of the carnival where I purchase our tickets and then lead her inside, towards where the games are.

I smile brightly as I watch her throw darts and shoot water at a clown face with precision. She wins prizes that I’m left to carry as we make our way through the various games.

We will talk on the way home .

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“I thought I made myself clear,” I say as we drive back towards the house. “I thought I told you exactly what you need to do with Kerri.” I glance in the rearview mirror and see Shiloh looking out the window wistfully.

“I know, Mommy,” she says quietly.

“And to do it, everything you need is in the basement.” I say. “I just don’t understand why you’re putting it off.”

“I just need the time to be right,” she says in her soft voice.

“You can’t wait forever,” I say. “When I give you an instruction, you need to follow it. What we do is important. Can’t you see that?”

“Yes, Mommy,” she says, her voice still soft.

I sigh and say, “Kerri will be back tomorrow. I’m giving you a week from tomorrow to complete it. Do you understand me?”

“Yes, Mommy.” Her voice quivers slightly.

“Don’t be afraid,” I say quietly. “Think about the fun we had today. Focus on that.”

We fall into a silence, and not an entirely comfortable one. But it doesn’t bother me. Uncomfortable subjects are what I am best at.

You have to be willing to tackle things head on, lest the madness get you, like it did

him.

He went too far; he went mad. He was a true artist until he lost it all. I will never lose it. I know that as a matter of fact. What I do is a service, and I treat it as such.

I don't allow personal feelings to cloud my judgement. I don't get attached. I don't even learn their names.

They are they .

An entity that has come to me for a purpose.

I pull up to the house and help Shiloh take her prizes to her bedroom before I go to make dinner. I don't particularly like junk food, but I let Shiloh have some cotton candy. Now she needs something healthy to balance that.

I make a vegetable casserole and put it in the oven to cook. I sit down at the table with a book and pick up from where I was reading. It's an anatomy book, and it always gives me new ideas for my room.

Maybe I'll go again tonight. Shiloh sleeps through the night and Kerri will be back in the morning. Perhaps I will see if anyone has wandered in, looking for their final release.

La Douleur Folle calls me back.

The oven dings and I take the casserole out. There's no necessity to call Shiloh. She knows that 'ding' means it's dinnertime. I hear her washing her hands and I do the same before I set the table.

She comes and sits down, and I dish up food for her before I dish up for myself. We

eat in silence, Shiloh concentrating on her food. She's probably worried I'll bring up Kerri again.

She needs to learn to let it go. It's nothing personal. It is an act. All things come to an end, sometimes sooner than expected, and people like us are sometimes necessary to hasten along the lives on the mortal coil.

When we're done, I load the dishwasher before packing away the leftovers for Kerri and Shiloh to reheat tomorrow.

I turn to my daughter. "Go shower and get into bed. I want you asleep early tonight."

"Are you going out?" Shiloh asks curiously.

I smile and kiss her head. "I won't be gone long."

Time is relative. She'll be asleep and I'll be home by the time she wakes up.

Time will pass like a river flows, without any grand announcement or important ceremony.

It just is.

Like we just are.

The things that I do today have no bearing on tomorrow, other than to snuff out a tiny light that was insignificant to begin with. Those who come to me have nothing left, or they wouldn't come to me in the first place.

I go change into jeans and a different shirt. A black one. It's easier to hide the blood on black clothes, but I need to do the laundry tomorrow, anyway.

I go to Shiloh once she is in bed, and I kiss her head. “You’re the best daughter in the whole world,” I say quietly. “Don’t you forget it.”

“You’re the best mommy,” she says in return with a toothy grin.

She curls up and I sit there until she falls asleep, then I go retrieve my coat, my purse, and my car keys and I lock the door behind me.

I leave that Esther behind. The doting mother, the caregiver, the birth mother. It’s left behind like a forgotten pet.

Carelessly and without worry.

I drive to La Douleur Folle and park. The old building beckons to me, and I know there are others that it calls to. But it feels like it has something specific in mind for me today. I decide to take a stroll to the cliff around the back of the property, overlooking the city park. It’s a haze in the dark—maybe because of the mist that’s forming, or maybe it’s because the air quality is so poor.

I stand there for the longest moment before I hear the crunch of leaves behind me. I don’t turn. It could be anyone, but I have no fear.

“Excuse me, do you work here?” A young voice asks me. I turn to see a boy, an older teenager, standing with his hands in his pockets like he’s in the principal’s office.

“It depends on what you’re looking for. Do you know where you are?”

“La Douleur Folle,” he says confidently. “I’ve been looking for it for some time.”

“What is it you want?” I ask, turning to look out at the lights again.

“To die,” he says in a quiet voice.

“Then you’re in the right place. But know this, if you enter you cannot leave, there are no take backs in a situation like this. Do you understand?”

“I know. I mean, I understand,” he says. “Do you, do it?”

“I do.”

“Will you... kill me?”

“I will end you, but I feel like that’s not all you want, boy.”

“My name is...”

“I don’t need to know your name.” I turn back to him. “You are a boy, and you want more than just death.”

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“I killed my sister. It was an accident.” I can hear the sob threatening to escape. “I picked her up from school and I rolled the car. She broke her neck. I don’t deserve a merciful death. I should have made her buckle in.”

I hold a hand up. “You have your own reasons, and you must live with them, or die with them. I’m only here to administer a service. If you want it drawn out, give me a time frame and I will do my best to make you suffer for your sins.”

“A week,” he says. “I want to suffer for a week and then I want it to end.”

He sounds so sure of himself. They always do when they’ve made this decision. Only to turn back on it once the suffering starts. Then they beg. They’ve made a mistake. It’s all wrong. I wonder how long it will take him during this week to change his mind.

Of course, there is no changing your mind once you enter.

I turn and walk towards the dark building and motion for him to follow.

Sitting at the front desk is a young woman, but I ignore her as I lead the boy up to my room.

It’s my room. No one else may use it. I’ve made that very clear. My toys are my own. I even clean up after myself, so I incur no additional charges.

The boy follows me upstairs, glancing at the reception desk.

“Don’t pay attention to her. Follow me.”

We walk into the room where there is a bed, a chest of drawers, and an en-suite bathroom.

“Make yourself comfortable,” I say calmly, going to the en-suite bathroom to wash my hands. I take off my coat and purse and rest them on the small cupboard in the bathroom before I return to the room.

He looks nervous, glancing around as though expecting something to jump out at him.

Suddenly the sound of screams come from down the hall, and I see a thin bead of sweat drip down his face.

“I’ll close the door,” I say, going to shut it. “It’s otherwise soundproof.”

I go to the dresser and open the bottom shelf, looking through the various toys I have there for the straps I’ll need to keep him down.

I pull them out and look at him. “Lie back, spread-eagled. We don’t want you trying to break free and making a run for it.”

He nods and does as I ask, but I can’t see the fear and hesitation in his eyes. He’s going to want to back out. I know it. He’s going to beg for his life. It’s just a question of how long until he does.

He wants it drawn out over a week. I will start small. Unlike those before me, I am in complete control of myself. No touch of madness here, no obsession.

Just this room, here and now.

And the boy.

I strap him to the four corners of the bed where there are metal rings before I retrieve a pair of scissors.

“What are you going to do with those?” he asks, his voice shaking.

“I don’t explain myself to you. But I do love to tell stories. Perhaps if you’re good, I’ll tell you one.”

I start to cut his clothes, working meticulously until all that’s left is his underwear. I start to snip those off and he balks, but doesn’t say anything further.

Once he’s fully naked, I inspect him. He has hair on his chest and stomach, and a patch around his cock that is hanging limp between his legs. He has a good length, excellent for playing with. I’m sure he’s a grower as well.

He’s looking at me with wide eyes as I retrieve a box cutter from the drawer and go into the second drawer to get some lemon-bleach blend that I’ve made, and a bag of salt.

He swallows as I approach him. I set the items down on the nightstand next to him and smile as I slowly push the box cutter blade out.

“This will hurt,” I say matter-of-factly.

I start to make small cuts on his chest and arms, and he hisses, but doesn’t ask me to stop. I make my way down his body and stop just at his groin. Then I start from his feet and up his legs, making sure to slice the skin between his toes. Tears fall down his face and he bites his lip.

He's brave, I'll give him that. This is going to be more fun than I anticipated.

I get back to his groin and hold his flaccid cock in my hand.

"No..." he whimpers.

I ignore him and start to make little stripes down his length and then slit two little cuts on each of his balls. I smirk as I finish, then I put the box cutter down and step back to inspect my artwork.

Blood is dribbling down from the various cuts, and it runs down his body. I pick up the bleach and his eyes widen as I spray it on the first cut. He cries out and tugs at his restraints, but I simply move onto the next cut. Working my way the same way I did with the box cutter, down to his groin, up his leg and then on his cock itself. He is screaming now, but I'm not finished.

I pick up the salt and start pouring it onto the cuts, rubbing it into the wounds so they clog with the white granules.

He shrieks, but he doesn't ask me to stop. He doesn't beg. He simply shrieks.

I lean over him and look into his eyes, now shining from the tears running down his face.

"I'm going to leave this here for now. Let you soak before the real fun begins. I'll be back tomorrow to start the real show. Sleep tight." I grab my coat and purse from the bathroom and walk to the door.

"Wait..." he calls to me as I leave the room and shut the door. I bark that my room is not to be touched as I pass the receptionist and then leave.

Once I'm back home, I check on Shiloh before I go shower. Tonight wasn't satisfactory in the way I'm used to, but it is the start of a fun project that's going to keep me occupied for a week.

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When I wake in the morning, it's to the sound of Kerri's cheery voice waking Shiloh up for the day. I try to shut my eyes again; I was having such a pleasant dream. The voices had not been silent last night, but the monsters sure did have some creative ideas. Ideas, I need to shop for today.

I get up and do my morning ritual before I say goodbye to Shiloh and Kerri, and remind Shiloh of what we talked about.

She nods numbly and I leave for the hardware store.

I take a cart and take my time going through each aisle. Sizing up the tools that are available to me. I get some planks of wood, a nail gun, carpet grippers, nails, hammers, superglue, and a host of other things that I know I can use tonight. It'll barely fit in my car, but I need it to because I need to take it with me tonight.

I am standing in the queue waiting to be checked out when my mind drifts to Shiloh and what she is doing. She is so perfect; I want her to be able to accomplish her dreams, but she needs to overcome this. I've given her a timeline. It's the same timeline I'm on, so I'm hoping she can be there for the final display.

I want her to be there. I want to share that moment with her.

Disposing of Kerri will be a piece of cake. Just drive her to La Douleur Folle and use the crematorium there.

Shiloh just needs to fulfill her end of the bargain and then we can celebrate together.

I check out and pay with my credit card before I refuse the assistant who wants to help me load my car. I have enough muscle power to see to it myself.

I push the cart to my car and load everything in neat order before I push the cart back to the loading bay and park it with the other carts.

Everything in its place.

I go back home and find that Shiloh and Kerri are out. I reheat some leftovers, and eat quietly before I go down to the basement. The one place that Kerri is not allowed. She doesn't know Shiloh is, or that Shiloh knows the code for the keypad that locks the door at the bottom of the stairs.

It's necessary, because how else will Shiloh access the toys?

I key in the four-digit code and open the door before going inside. I turn the light on and look around the room at the various blades and tools that hang on the walls.

There's so much to choose from. I don't know why Shiloh is having a difficult time. Maybe I must mention that she can use more than one if she's scared.

I've told her where to cut to end Kerri quickly and then how to dismember her. It really isn't that difficult. She's helped me cook before, so she knows how to cut things.

I hear them upstairs and shut the light off and exit the basement. Shiloh pauses at the top of the stairs and looks down at me with wide eyes. I smile and nod.

Shiloh nods and then leaves again.

Kerri is in the living room when I come upstairs, and she is setting up Shiloh's

homeschooling for the afternoon. No doubt they took a trip to a museum or something enriching this morning, which I do appreciate. But au pairs are a dime a dozen, and anyone can do that. Good help is easy to find in a country where there's an employment crisis.

I imagine Kerri's pretty little neck slit and bleeding, and I beam.

"Hello, Esther," she says with a smile. "You're home early."

"I didn't have work today," I say. "I'm on leave for a week. Taking some time for myself."

"It's great being your own boss, isn't it?" she asks. "You have so much free time."

"It is nice, but it isn't easy. I work really hard."

And I mean, I work really hard.

Whether it's here or at La Douleur Folle.

"Getting Shiloh ready for the afternoon?" I ask. "Why don't you take a nap afterwards? You look tired."

"She ran me off my feet this morning," Kerri admits. "Maybe we can both take a nap this afternoon."

I smile broadly. "That sounds like a wonderful idea. I am going to run a few more errands before I go out for the evening. You'll be fine with Shiloh the next few nights, won't you? I have a little pet project I'm working on just for her."

"Sounds great. What is it?"

“Oh, it’s a surprise,” I say menacingly, but she doesn’t pick up on it. She never notices when my tone changes. “A surprise for both of you.”

“I look forward to it.” Kerri smiles. “Enjoy your errands.”

“Enjoy your nap,” I say and leave the house. I don’t really have errands to run, but I want to give Shiloh time to maybe get on with our little promise today.

I drive around aimlessly for an hour or two, then I stop at the pharmacy and get a few items to patch up the boy with. The more I patch, the more I can hurt. Give them hope and take it away. That’s the best satisfaction you can get. Oh, look, I’m healing you, just so I can cut you again, you little fucker.

I giggle at myself, and the pharmacist looks at me curiously. “Sorry, inside joke.”

He nods and I take my things and go back home. When I get home, both Kerri and Shiloh are asleep and I’m angry to see nothing has been done to Kerri. I’m almost tempted to wake Shiloh up and make her do it while I’m there, but that would defeat the object of the task I’ve set for her. She needs to obey.

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When I return to La Douleur Folle, all is quiet. It is early evening, and although I prefer to work under the cover of darkness, I'm not averse to starting early.

I go up to my room, taking the supplies with me. It takes me a few trips, and no one is there to see me or judge me.

The boy is asleep in bed and wakes up on the final trip when I bring the planks in.

"What is that for?" he asks, his voice dry and raspy. I get out a bottle of water and bring it to his lips.

"Shh, drink."

He drinks happily. He's pissed himself, but the stink doesn't bother me. It's quite common for them to piss themselves, and I'll burn everything in the crematorium when I'm done and replace it anyway.

I don't offer him food. No, he will starve while I torture him. I just don't want him to dehydrate.

A few days without water and he'll die. He can go for a week without eating. That won't kill him.

I will.

Once he's had his fill of water, he rests back. I can see the cuts have started to scab over already. Good. The salt and bleach would have disinfected the wounds, so

there's no chance of infection.

There might be after today, though.

I leave him on the bed where he asks me again what I've brought, but I ignore him. I put my coat and purse down in the bathroom and I begin assembling the planks. One the length of his body facing down and then the other two across to form an 'I' shape.

I leave it on the floor for now. I want to build up his anticipation. He's trying to crane his neck to watch what I'm doing, but the way I have him bound makes it uncomfortable. I start to unpack the rest of my supplies. I stack them in neat little piles along the far wall where I can view them easily.

I then go and wash my hands and stand before him.

"What are you going to do to me?"

"Not knowing is half the fun. Didn't you ever have a surprise party?" I ask, tracing a finger along the cuts on his body.

"Ye... yes," he finally says as I stroke near his groin.

"Then you know it's best when you don't know what's coming. It'll entertain me and it will draw out your punishment for killing your sister."

He looks away, ashamed. I've reminded him of why he came here, and I hope it keeps him going. The constant reminder that he killed his little sister. I hope it haunts him as I torture him. Because that's what he wants, and after all, I am just here to perform a service.

"What was her name?"

“I don’t want to talk about it,” he says gruffly.

“Fine.” I go retrieve the spiked carpet grips. I fit it against his one foot, press down and yank it up so the spikes meant to hold the carpet pierce through his flesh and stick in.

He screams, cursing and spitting vitriol. I do the same with the other one and I watch the blood drip down his feet, onto his heels and onto the bed.

He tries to move his feet, but I can’t have that, so I take some duct tape that I bought and I bind the grips to his feet so he can’t shake them off. I then spray bleach into the spaces between, making sure to soak his wounds.

He screams again, and I delight in the sound. This is what I come for, after all. Their screams silence the monstrous voices inside of me. It makes me a good mother, a good worker, and a delightful boss.

It stills the deathly heart that beats next to my lively one. The one that demands blood and sacrifice.

The boy cries out again as I check the duct tape is holding securely, and then I take him some water. I let him sip it and I see the sweat forming on his brow. He’s taking the strain. Good, because I’m nowhere near done.

I shift and get the planks lined up to the bed, then I push them roughly under him. I don’t care if he gets splinters from the unvarnished wood.

“What...”

“Hush,” I say quietly.

Grabbing the nail gun I purchased, I line up the top plank to his bound hands. I press the nail gun into his palm and hit the trigger once.

Thwack!

A nail shoots forth and secures his palm to the wood. At first the wound doesn't do anything, but as his shrieks fill the room and it starts to bleed, he's finally screaming for me to stop. That it's too much. Pity, I hoped he'd last longer than a day.

Still, there is no going back.

He clenches his other fist, but he's weak enough for me to pry it open and use the nail gun to secure that hand to the plank.

Thwack!

He shrieks again. He's crying now, and he's pissed himself again.

His feet are in the carpet grips, but I line up his ankle with the bottom plank of wood and shoot that nail through his bone and flesh to secure it. I check it's secure, ignoring his screams as I move to the next one. Blood flows freely now, and the coppery scent fills my nose and lungs. I feel so alive. I feel fulfilled. No, not yet. The true fulfillment will come later. When I play with that toy. For now, though, I'm content to fulfill the boy's wish to suffer for his sins. After all, it's why he came to La Douleur Folle and why he sought me out. He could have picked anyone else, and maybe he didn't know that. Maybe someone else would have let him go by now. I don't enter their rooms and inspect their workings.

Just like they aren't to enter my room and inspect mine.

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He passed out shortly after, and no point playing with someone who isn't conscious. Where is the fun in that? I watch his wounds for the longest time until they stop bleeding and the blood dries where it has run down his skin. I lean forward and trace a finger along one of the bloody lines, and then touch the nail embedded in his palm. He stirs slightly but is still passed out.

I grab the hammer and aim it carefully, throwing my weight behind it as I strike his palm.

His eyes fly open, and he screams in pain.

I smile and slide the hammer up his arm and down his chest. "Did you know with the right amount of force, you can break someone's ribs without killing them?"

"No... please... I won't tell anyone. Please, just let me go."

"I wonder if your parents would care enough to look for you after what you did," I muse, my eyes meeting his. I see the tears threatening to start again and soon enough, they do. I lean over and kiss his cheek, tasting the salty tear.

Then I move away, draw my arm back and strike his right-side ribs with a hammer. There's an ungodly crunching sound, and he's too breathless to scream. He garbles out a sound, something between a moan and a scream, and sobs. Oh, his sobs fill me with delight as I go around the bed to his left side. He tries to angle away from me.

"Please, I didn't understand what the fuck I was doing. I just felt bad," he sobs out.

“You should feel bad,” I say calmly. “You murdered your sister.” I swing the hammer, and it connects with his ribs at an angle. I feel them break under my swing and I grin as he screams. The screams hurt even more where his ribs are broken, so he quietens down to a whimper.

I take the hammer and set it back down neatly against the far wall, and pick up the pliers.

Who needs nails anyway?

I go to his feet first and grip his large toenail with the pliers.

“No... please...”

“You wanted this,” I remind him. “You asked me for this. But I’m feeling merciful. I will only do one foot tonight. Then we can take a break.”

I start to pull on the nail and he moans, biting down on his lip until he draws blood. It hurts to cry out; it hurts because I’m hurting his already damaged feet. The carpet grips dig in deeper as he moves his foot, trying to get away.

I watch as the nail slowly extracts itself from the nail bed. Blood starts trickling, then pouring out the wound from the sides. There’s a little give, and the nail starts to slide off. I deposit it on the floor beside me before I start on the next toe. Then the next, then the one after that. I’m on the pinky toe when I realize he’s passed out from the pain. Dammit. There’s no pleasure in that.

I decide to leave the pinky one for tomorrow night. He should experience everything firsthand.

He needs a higher pain tolerance.

Thus far, his pain tolerance has been lacking, but it will surely get better.

Thoughts run through my mind as I clean up. I wash up in the bathroom before I grab my coat and purse, and shut the door behind me.

There's no one in sight, but I can hear cries coming from down the hallway as I leave. I go downstairs and exit, making my way to my car. This is a sanctuary. A place of worship. A place where the devil comes to make his deals.

I am that devil.

I think of some of the medieval ways of torturing people and wonder if there's any I can implement. There's a few I've been dying to try, but they'll kill him too quickly.

I can't have that.

His request was very specific.

I get home and sit behind the wheel on the driveway for a moment. The living room light is on, and I can see someone moving, someone too tall to be Shiloh.

Kerri.

Another night has passed. Perhaps Shiloh couldn't do it because Kerri didn't go to sleep. It is strange for her to be up so late.

That's it. Shiloh didn't get a chance, that is all. I sit out there until the light shuts off about a half hour later. When I'm sure Kerri's gone to bed, I get out of the car and head in, hanging my coat and purse up before I go to my room. I strip the clothes off and take them to the hamper. Shit, I didn't do the laundry.

I get out my sleepwear and take a long, hot shower, washing the smell of death from my body. When I'm done and dressed, I brush my teeth and then take the laundry hamper to the laundry room and set a load on. I'll switch it to the dryer in the morning. It's only for a few hours while I sleep.

I had promised myself no more long nights, but this week is going to defy that.

The boy wanted his dues, and I had agreed to deliver them.

I go to the bedroom and slip between the cool sheets. Resting back, I get as comfortable as I can, and shut my eyes. But sleep doesn't come to me. Instead, my mind races with endless possibilities of what I can do to Boy. I sigh and turn over on my side, focusing instead on Shiloh. This just won't do. She has clear instructions and I'm sure she can catch Kerri off guard. I don't think she's afraid of doing it. At least, I don't want to think that.

After all, she is my daughter.

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I scroll through my phone while I spoon scrambled eggs into my mouth. Never missing a beat. I'm looking for inspiration with what to do with Boy, and I have to admit there's quite a lot.

Today I want to go see my beautiful creation and then I'm going to do another supply run, only with more interesting, inspired idea in mind.

Shiloh and Kerri are also seated at the table, eating and not talking because they don't want to disturb me. Kerri briefly mentioned she's taking Shiloh to the aquarium today for a lesson on the ocean, and I simply nodded while I poured my coffee.

When I'm done, I wait for them to leave. While they get ready, I go put the laundry on to dry and do another load.

Kerri is in charge of doing Shiloh's and her laundry, but it's in a separate hamper. They know not to touch my hamper.

Things are just as I like them.

Once the laundry is on, I go downstairs to the basement and enter the four-digit pin to access the room. I go in, shutting the door behind me and turning on the bright light.

Nothing has been touched in the room, and that disappoints me. It's as if Shiloh hasn't even explored her options. I'll have to have another chat with her tonight before I go back to Boy.

I choose some options for her and lay them out on the metal table in the middle of the

room. They aren't too heavy, but they're deadly sharp and would go straight through Kerri with enough force.

Shiloh needed to not be worried, her aim must just be true, and her heart must be in it.

I go outside into the backyard, and I grab some large pieces of wood and wrestle them downstairs. I set them down and dust my hands and clothes off.

Kerri can take an hour's break for lunch while I chat with Shiloh. The basement is soundproof, so she won't know what's going on down here.

I wait for them to get back, sitting at the kitchen table after folding the laundry and packing it away carefully—by color, fabric, and purpose.

I can still taste the salty tears on my tongue, and it reminds me I still need to run errands to pick up some things for Boy.

I hear them come in excitedly. Shiloh is describing how much she loved seeing the sharks in the big tank. I smile softly. She would be attracted to sharks.

They walk into the kitchen, and both stop, surprised to see me there. I smile and stand up. "It sounds like you guys had fun."

I go over to Shiloh. "I wanted to spend lunch with you. Kerri, why don't you take some of the lunch money and go out for lunch?"

"Uh. sure." She gives me a hesitant smile. "Is everything okay?"

"Just want some quality time with Shiloh," I say with a small, polite smile.

Kerri nods and leaves again, and Shiloh looks up at me curiously. "We went to the

aquarium,” she finally says, unable to take the quiet anymore.

I nod and walk towards the basement staircase. “Follow me.”

“Mommy...” she says quietly. “I hate going into the basement.”

“Come, Shiloh,” I say sternly, standing at the top of the stairs.

Shiloh doesn’t dare cross me. She obeys and leads the way down. “Enter the pin.”

She does as she’s told, and the door unlocks. We both go in, and I shut the door behind me.

“Now, we’re going to practice your aim and strength today, so you feel a bit more confident about getting Kerri just right. Why don’t you pick what you want to use?”

I cross over to the metal table and stand there with my hands behind my back.

Shiloh steps forward and I see her hands trembling as she looks at the selection I’ve chosen for her. She finally picks up a machete and holds it in both hands.

“Mommy...” she protests again.

“Strike the wood as hard as you can,” I say, motioning to the wood I brought in from the back garden.

“As hard as you can,” I remind her as she steps up to it.

She lifts the machete and strikes the wood, but I can feel she’s holding back.

“Loosen up and relax, Shiloh, you need to focus your energy on your swing to bring

it right into the wood.”

She pulls the machete out of the wood and raises it again, striking the wood a little harder.

“That’s better,” I say with a smile. “Again.”

We go at it for an hour, and she works up a sweat despite the coolness of the basement. When we’re done, I take the machete from her and go to sharpen it.

“Now, we can practice maybe once or twice more, but you’re running out of time to deal with Kerri. Do you understand, Shiloh?”

She nods and looks ready to cry.

“What’s wrong?” I ask as I run the blade along the stone to sharpen it.

“I just don’t think I can do it.”

“Of course you can, and you’re going to because I’ve instructed you to, Shiloh. And you’ll do exactly as Mommy says, right?”

“Yes, Mommy,” she says quietly.

“Go upstairs and get washed up. If Kerri asks, tell her we were moving heavy stuff for Mommy’s work,” I say, setting the machete back on the table.

She enters the pin to the door from the inside and flees up the stairs. I follow her out and shut off the light and the door behind me.

I go back upstairs just as Kerri walks back in with her handbag draped over her arm.

“Have fun?” she asks.

“Yes, I always love spending quality time with Shiloh,” I say with a smile. “She’s certainly fond of you.”

“Thanks, Esther, I try to make the days interesting for her.”

“From what I hear,” I say. “They’re to die for.”

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I leave Shiloh with Kerri while I go run errands. I gather as much as I can fit into my car, excited about the possibilities of what can be done. When I'm finished, I don't go home. I go straight to the boy.

I collect my supplies, and in three short trips I've taken everything to my room. There's going to be a lot added to my repertoire, but I don't mind the cost.

Anything to enhance the boy's experience.

I set my purse and coat down and go over to him, giving him some much-needed water. He's defecated on the bed, but the smell doesn't bother me. It's a natural part of life.

Besides, there will be nothing left for him to shit out soon enough.

I gather the branches of the tree I bought, and I loop some thread around it. His ribs are bruised, but that won't stop me. I wind the twine around the branches until I make them into one secure branch.

"It's called Birching," I explain as I step up to him. His eyes widen. "A torture for those who didn't behave. This is on the lighter scale of what I have planned for you, my little devil."

"Please, I'm begging you. It's not too late."

"It is too late, I'm afraid. You entered. Of your own free will, remember?"

I raise the branches above my head and bring them swinging down on his broken ribs. He coughs and cries out, whimpering through his pain. I do it again and again, and then I pause. "I should let you recover after each one. It'll be more intense that way."

"No... please..."

I smile and trace the branches down his middle. "Maybe if you survive what I have in store for you, maybe you will walk away to see the light again."

I don't mean it. I just want to give him hope. It's a game. A part of the service. Let them believe they will live through it, and they'll put up with a lot more. I raise the branch and bring it swinging down on his ribs again. He coughs and some blood spurts out of his mouth.

I raise it again and bring it down, and he coughs some more.

"Could it be that your lung is punctured?" I muse. "That would be a shame."

I raise the branch and bring it down on his lower stomach and he cries out. I continue doing this at intervals until he is panting for air.

Then I sit the birch rod down in the corner, smiling.

"What should we do next?"

"Please, can I have some water?" he gasps.

I go to him with the bottle and hold it out to his lips. He drinks down greedily, and I pull it away after a moment so he doesn't choke on it.

I rustle through the pharmacy bags and pull out what I need to administer the enema.

“We should get you all cleared out before we proceed.”

I set the enema on top of the chest of drawers before I pull out some chili pepper and turpentine. “I was going to give you a normal one, but in Argentina, this is used on political dissenters, especially post-independence.” I combine the turpentine and the chili powder in a bowl and suck it up with the rectal bulb syringe. “It might sting a little bit.”

“What is in it?” he asks, unable to see what I’m doing. “What are you doing to me?”

“This might pinch a little.”

I lift his cock and slide the syringe between his buttocks, probing for his anal entrance. He tries to clench down, but he’s weak and it only holds it for a moment before I find what I’m looking for, and I insert the syringe as much as it will go in. I squeeze the bulb and then withdraw the syringe, stepping away quickly.

His screams fill the room again and he shits blood. “It burns!” he shrieks. “Oh my God, it burns!”

“Oh, it will burn,” I say fondly, reaching to stroke his hair out of his face. It’s plastered to his face from his sweat, and I brush the strands out of his eyes. I go back to my supplies and bring out two huge lamps. While he screams, I set them up on either side of his face. I plug them into a mobile battery I’ve brought, and turn them on. The blinding lights force him to close his eyes, and he moans.

He is still shitting blood, just not as much now. The smell has permeated the room, and it is disgusting. As what he did was disgusting.

Reckless.

Irresponsible.

Punishable by death.

I light a cigarette. A filthy habit if there ever was one, and one I don't like to partake in, but I drag on the smoke once and then twice, and then I put it out on the inside flesh of his arm. He cries out, trying to open his eyes but is once again blinded by the bright lights.

"Please, no, shut the lights off. I can't take it."

"You wanted this," I remind him. "This is your penance."

"I just want to go home to my family," he sobs. "I'll apologize. I'll beg them for forgiveness. Please, just let me go."

"We'll see."

I walk back to my supplies and hum a little tune, a nursery rhyme I taught Shiloh many years ago.

I hum it more clearly, the sweet sound mingling with the boy's groans. There's so much to choose from, I don't even know where to begin. It makes me giddy.

I could, of course, end this quickly and go home to Shiloh and make sure she does as she's told, but that would go against the contract the boy and I have made. I don't break the contract.

I don't break promises.

As I said, there is no turning back once you have entered.

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He passes out, despite the bright lights in his eyes. It must be from sheer exhaustion and pain.

I wait for a moment, ruffling through my various purchases before I decide to finish off pulling his nails out and maybe adding some more decorative burns to his arms.

I need him awake, though. Awake and aware.

I pause on a thought as I think of a supplier who can drop something off in my mailbox that could help me keep Boy alive for the week. I retrieve my phone and text The Pharmacist. This isn't the same pharmacist who helped me at the store. This is a backdoor kind of guy who can get me the drugs I need.

Adrenaline.

Just like adrenaline.

Once I've texted him to drop it off in a wrapped container in my mailbox, I go back to the boy, who is stirring now, and I pick up the pliers. I don't even wait until he's fully awake before I start pulling out the nails on his other foot.

He cries out. No... he screams.

I don't know how he is managing it with his broken ribs. It's not particularly loud, but it's impressive, nonetheless.

As I work, I hum the lullaby. I scold myself. I can't get distracted with thoughts of

what Shiloh is doing while I'm busy with a contract.

Once the nails ripped from his toes. I set the pliers down and grab medical supplies and a chair. I set the chair next to his leg.

"Don't move. I don't want to mess this up."

I hear him groan as I take out a scalpel and fit a clean blade.

I'm almost tempted to give him something to bite down on. But I like the sound of his screams and I'm not merciful in general.

He wanted to suffer. It was his request.

I lean on the flesh of his thigh and start to carefully carve out the first letter of a word. I don't want to cut too deep, and I use alcohol swabs to wipe the blood away as it flows.

I peel the skin off delicately and look at the flesh underneath. Healthy pink flesh. I start with the next letter. He is crying again. But this time he sounds angry when he speaks to me.

"You bitch. Let me go. Let me the fuck go!"

"Now, now, swearing at me will win you no points," I say calmly. "And don't move, otherwise I'll have to start fresh on the inside of your leg."

He's too weak to move, to resist what I'm doing as I lift the next piece of skin off and wipe with an alcohol swab.

I begin the next letter. I concentrate deeply as I carve into him, removing just the skin

to spell out the word he said to me.

Sister.

Although it would have been fun to try it in a more cursive font than just the neat print, I've done it in all capitals.

I take the excess skin and stand up, moving to his head. "Are you hungry?"

"Yes," he gasps out.

"Then eat." I hold the skin to his lips.

"No..."

I force it into his mouth. "Eat it."

I put a hand over his mouth so he can't spit it out. He gags and I smile down at him. "You're going to eat it all, and if you throw it up, I'll feed that to you too. So, choose your poison carefully, Boy."

"My name is..." he tries to say.

"No," I say sternly. "I don't care what your name is. You are Boy. That is all you are. You will never be more than that to anyone."

He swallows and gags again, but I'm already shoving the next piece of flesh into his mouth. He tries to bite my finger, but I'm too fast for him. "Now, now. You don't want me to remove your teeth just yet, do you?"

I keep my hand over his mouth as he chews and swallows.

“Four more pieces to go,” I coo softly.

It takes the better part of a half an hour to get him to swallow all the pieces, but he does, and then I offer him some more water.

“Why are you doing this?” he asks. “How demented are you?”

“I’m not demented,” I say harshly. “But when you make a contract with me, it’s binding. You wanted this. That’s why I’m doing this. You asked me for this, and you followed me into this room. I didn’t force you to find me. I didn’t force you to come in here. You sought me out.”

“I didn’t know...” he cries. “I didn’t understand.”

“Too bad,” I say. “Let this be a valuable lesson to you about keeping your word when you make an agreement.”

I wash up and pack everything neatly away for the night. “I’ll see you tomorrow night. Rest if you can.”

“Please turn the lamps off,” he groans. “I’m begging you.”

“No,” I say calmly. “Enjoy.”

I leave and go downstairs to my car. I get in and sit back, sighing quietly. That was a relief. It wasn’t too late to get home, and maybe if Kerri and Shiloh are quiet tomorrow, I can sleep in a little, though I doubt I will. I need to make sure Shiloh is practicing and is ready by the end of the week. I hate that she’s leaving it to the last minute, but I trust that she’ll do it.

She always does what Mommy tells her to.

I start my car and drive home, ready for a hot shower and my bed. When I get there, I check on Kerri, who is asleep on the sofa again and still in one piece. I go downstairs to the basement and find the machete on the table where I left it. No further wood has been chopped.

I pause by Shiloh's bedroom and look in on my sleeping angel. I don't want her to disappoint me. She is my everything.

Everything that I could possibly want.

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I go to the kitchen just as Shiloh and Kerri are finishing breakfast.

“Morning, Esther,” Kerri says cheerfully. “Bacon and eggs?”

“Please,” I say, turning the coffee machine on.

Shiloh meets my gaze and then looks away. She knows I’m disappointed.

There’s a package on the table with my name on it, and I know it’s from The Pharmacist. I set my coffee down and pick the package up. I take it through to my study and set it on the desk where everything is squared off and neat.

I look around and wonder if I should spring clean today. Get rid of the old and bring in some new items. Running a home business isn’t easy, but it does pay well when you do it right, and I do it expertly.

Everything in here has a place and is packed away in either a drawer or tote. Easily accessible for when I need to send packages. My actual packaging is stacked on some shelves on the far side of the room.

Swag, that’s what they call it. I make people’s branded swag, and it sells like hot cakes.

From corporations to independent creatives, I can make anything listed on my website. I shouldn’t have taken the week off. I’m sure the orders are piling high, but I work diligently and get them done when I’m not busy with other contracts.

I go back to the kitchen where my food and coffee are waiting for me, but Kerri and Shiloh have left the table. I can hear them in the living room preparing for their lessons.

I eat in silence, listening to their chit chat as they discuss math problems. Kerri's voice grinds into me. Knowing she shouldn't be here, knowing Shiloh should be done with her irritates me. It's out of my routine. It's out of my control.

I don't like when things are out of my control.

I stab at my bacon and slice through it. I take a deep breath and carefully lift a forkful of the meat to my mouth and chew on it thoughtfully.

I'd given her a week. I cannot lose my cool until her time has run out. I don't know what's going on in that pretty little head of hers, but I'm sure she will figure something out. She is, after all, my daughter. I've been preparing her for this her whole life.

After I've finished my food, I rinse off my dishes and place them in the dishwasher—which is now full. I set it to run a cycle and go back to my office, shutting the door behind me. I don't touch the package. There's no need. I know what's in it and I will pay for it later with a cash deposit into his offshore account.

I start at one end of the room and work my way through each tote and drawer. I pull out what I'm low on stock of and make a note to order more. I also make a note of what must go on sale because I'm not going to restock it. I'm meticulous in my workings, and I'm only disturbed when I hear Shiloh and Kerri leaving for lunch. No doubt Kerri is taking her somewhere special.

I can tell Shiloh likes Kerri, and that's a problem. It's her first mistake. Don't make it personal. Personal gets you into trouble, it stops you from doing what needs to be

done. I don't get personal with any of my contracts.

I move onto my packaging supplies and tally up what I need to order before I sit at my desk and open up my computer. As I'm placing the orders, I'm wondering to myself how Boy is doing—whether he's managing to rest with the lamps on. I surely hope not, otherwise they were a waste to get.

I think about his dilemma and the fact he wants to be released. I need to give him false hope. I need him to believe I'm going to release him in the end. Maybe closer to the time I'll play little mind games with him.

I want to draw out this torture as long as I can, but I have already planned for my finale. It's a beauty of a thing that I claimed.

But that's for another day.

Those thoughts will distract me from today.

I place my order and pack everything away. The room looks spotless once more. I make a sandwich for lunch before I go lie down for a nap. The long nights are starting to get to me. I need to rest up in order to ensure I'm at my peak when I am fulfilling the contract.

I wake up an hour later to the sound of soft talking. It's Kerri and Shiloh, who must have realized I was napping. I sit up and stretch. I feel well rested and ready for the evening, but first I need to make dinner. I know I can leave Kerri to do it, but I like to still be involved.

I pull out some ribeye steaks from the fridge and take them outside to the blacktop. I fry them to perfection before I bring them back in and let them rest while I make instant mashed potatoes and steam some garden mix vegetables to go with it. I dish

up for the three of us and set the places.

“Ladies,” I call. “Dinner’s ready.”

Shiloh comes running in as I start cutting up her steak. She sits down in her spot and smiles up at me. “It’s my favorite.”

“I know,” I say with a half-smile.

Kerri comes in and smiles gratefully at me. “Thank you, Esther, this looks delicious.”

“Good enough to be someone’s last meal,” I say with a smile at Shiloh, who averts her gaze.

Kerri doesn’t notice. She never notices when I say things like that. I’m sure she just thinks I’m a bit eccentric. Maybe I am.

But I’m not crazy. No, I’m the furthest thing from crazy.

Everything needs to be in its natural order.

I will make sure of it.

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I walk tonight, carrying my little parcel under my arm like a guarded possession. I don't have any fears as I walk through the dark streets.

Teenagers have been throwing rocks at the overhead lights until they are destroyed, so the way is not well lit.

Most women would think twice about walking such a dangerous path, but I'm not scared.

I walk a far darker path than anyone I could meet on these roads.

I guess I didn't just stumble into this way of life. I think it was always something inherent in me. When I was younger, a lot younger—long before I had Shiloh—I once was rebellious. I fought with activists and pacifists and all the 'ists' in between. I was always a rebel, but there had always been something darker in my soul.

When I was a child, I used to pull the wings off flies. Catch them, pin them, and rip off their wings slowly. No one knew. At least, I don't think anyone noticed. My mother was too busy with her feminism to notice what I did.

Then there was the time I drowned the little boy. That was my first death. It activated something deep down inside me. He had been a toddler, but he kept getting in my way and we were alone, left to play by the pool. A foolish mistake.

I first pushed him in, then I held his head under water. I left him floating in the water while I went inside to play with my dolls. They each had their place in my dollhouse. The screams that echoed through the house when he was discovered stirred

something deep inside of me. A happiness I hadn't been able to explain.

At first, I had been worried about being caught. I don't want to go to prison; I have no intention of it. My mark is to be left on this world more tangibly than others, and for that, I cannot be locked up.

I need to be able to move freely.

I moved within the shadows and dealt with the back door—the black market. I moved stealthily in the shadows, while playing an innocent angel during the day.

At nighttime I came alive.

I didn't want to push drugs. That wasn't the lifestyle for me. Nor did I want to mug people. No, I wanted to perform a service. The more people I got to know, the more I learned about forbidden services people performed. Assassins. Bounty hunters.

These were the people with whom I could relate to, though I didn't ever make friends. There is no place in this world for friends. No, instead I absorbed every ounce of advice they had to offer me, until one came along and mentioned it.

La Douleur Folle.

A secret so well-kept it took me many years to uncover it, and then a few more to uncover its location. No one would speak of it. It was for civilized company, not that I kept company with anyone civilized to begin with. It was a death trap; it was reported. The root of evil. The place in which hell was built. A place where people went to—to die.

I had made my way there and expressed my willingness for a room. There had been others, but we didn't interact. We never interact.

It isn't in our nature. We have our spaces, and in those spaces, our greatest imaginings can come to life.

This was a sanctuary. A place where I could be myself—completely myself, and perform the real work I was destined to do.

I hadn't hesitated when they brought me my first, nor my second, nor any after that. Sometimes there are lulls between contracts and the demons inside of me roar in anger, but I keep them under control.

I will not be taken by madness like he was.

No, I am in control, and Shiloh will learn that from me. She will learn control, and that the darkness is not to be feared.

Even now, the shadows follow me almost longingly. Calling to me from their darkness. Recognizing me as one of them, a movement against the light. Where there is brightness we shrink back, but in the night, we grow and we feast.

We devour the light and bring forth an eternal night.

A couple walks toward me, if they're surprised to see me they don't say anything. They're arm in arm. Safety in numbers, some would say, but there have been times when there's been more than one contract to complete at a time, and numbers didn't keep anyone safe.

The package is squeezed tight against me. It's in protective Styrofoam so I can't accidentally crush the syringes or vials of adrenaline.

I wonder if Boy is ready for tonight. Has he moved onto acceptance? Has he realized his fate?

Only time will tell.

I start up the hill towards La Douleur Folle, and once I reach it; I slip through its doors like a snake slipping through the eaves of a house unseen, ready to startle anyone who comes across me, ready to strike... but there's no one. I can hear the crematorium in the background, but that's the only noise I hear until I reach the boy.

He's groaning. Begging for help.

I'm surprised he has the energy.

I open the door, and he squints in my direction.

"No. Somebody help!" he yells before I shut the door.

"Good evening," I say.

"Please, no."

I set the package down on the bedside table and go take off my coat and purse, leaving them both in the bathroom. I wash my hands and go to unwrap the package.

"Did you get any rest?"

"Please."

"I'll take that as a no. Exhaustion can do a lot to you, but I have just the pick-me-up." I take out a syringe and take off the cap, protecting the needle. "It's all sterile, don't worry. My supplier is top market."

I set the syringe down and make a tourniquet on his arm from a strap I found in the

chest of drawers. His veins pop out, and I insert the needle and squeeze the plunger.

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“I feel like my heart is going to explode,” he gasps out. He is sweating something fierce.

“It won’t,” I say calmly. “Just take a deep breath and try to relax while I decide what we’re going to do next. Would you like some water?”

“Yes...” he gasps out.

I take him a bottle and hold it to his lips. “You might survive this yet,” I say bemusedly.

I see it in his eyes instantly, a spark of hope, but it falters. I don’t think he really believes me. I let him drink his fill and then I set the bottle down.

“I’m going to clean some of your wounds. We don’t want you to get an infection just yet.” I get out the antiseptic spray and some gauze. The longer I treat him, the longer he’ll stay alive.

“Please turn off the lamps,” he groans.

“I’m afraid I can’t do that,” I say softly. “It’s necessary.”

I look at the spot where I carved the word sister into the side of his thigh, and I spray it with antiseptic and clean it up. He hisses and I try not to smile. His pain is my gain, after all.

Once it’s clean, I leave it to air-dry before I go get a small grater. He can’t see what I

have. He's still being blinded by the bright lamps. I spray the grater with antiseptic and then use alcohol swabs to wipe his nipples.

"No, what are you doing?" he groans out. "Please, I can't take it anymore."

"You will take it for the rest of the week. If you want to see your family again, this is the only way. You have to survive. Just three more nights and this will all be over."

He pants and I know he's going to scream. It's just a result of what I do. There are always screams.

I hold the grater under his nipple, press down, and drag it up. It draws blood, and yes; he does scream. A delightful, blood-curdling scream that would set normal people's teeth on edge. I bring it down again and drag it up; the grater removing the flesh of the nipple and half the nipple itself. I smile and bring it down, once more dragging it up his chest, removing the last of the nipple and more flesh.

I transfer to the other nipple and repeat my actions, then I go over each wound until he is left with two bloody holes where his nipples should be.

"You don't need those," I say quietly. "Don't worry, it won't kill you."

He tugs on his bindings, shifting the nails holding his hands in place. He cries out again and forcibly relaxes his body. He tenses up again and tries to pull his hands off the nails. It's admirable, and I'm sure the adrenaline is helping. He managed to free one hand, with a gut-wrenching shriek he coughs up some blood.

"Don't forget your broken ribs," I say quietly. "Screaming will only hurt more. Now, what have you done here? This wasn't part of the plan."

I go over to inspect his hand, spraying it with bleach instead of disinfectant. He cries

out, and his tears streaming down the sides of his sweaty face.

“We’ll have to fix that,” I say, going to retrieve the nail gun.

“No, please. You don’t have to...”

“Oh, but I do. It’s all part of the experience,” I say fondly, as though I’m a tourist guide taking someone on a tour of an ancient artifact or of someone else’s culture.

I position his hand over the wood again and select a fresher piece of flesh. I press the nail gun into his hand. With a thwack; I pin his hand back down.

He cries again, but he’s struggling to breathe. I give him a moment, and spend it going through my supplies. The night is still young, and there’s so much I can do with him over the next three nights before the grand finale.

I already have the second to last night planned out to the letter. It’s going to be glorious. And the final night, when I will use a special toy. A claimed toy.

I bring myself back to the present, where Boy is writhing in pain. I smile to myself and spray bleach where his nipples once were, making him cry again.

The night has barely begun, and I have many creative ideas about what to do to the boy tonight. I don’t want him to OD on adrenaline though, so I’ll take it slow. It might be a long night, but it will be worth it. Maybe once I’m done with Boy and Shiloh has completed her task, we can go on a little holiday together. A little break down to the seaside.

Just the two of us.

That would be nice.

“You know, I have a daughter. If anyone put her in danger, I don’t know how I’d forgive them. Do you think your parents would forgive you?”

“Yes,” he gasps out. “Of course they would.”

“You didn’t believe that four nights ago.” I spray his nipples again with bleach. “In fact, you were rather sure of that.”

“I was wrong. I wasn’t thinking straight,” he cries out.

“No, you’re not thinking straight now. You’re experiencing pain and adrenaline, and you’re blinded by the light. You’re going crazy slowly, Boy.”

“It doesn’t have to be this way,” he moans. “I won’t tell anyone.”

“Oh, I believe you,” I say. “Do you believe me when I say that you will survive this? And come out stronger for it?”

It’s a lie, but a necessary one. I need him to believe. I need him to have hope. It makes this so much sweeter when they believe they’re going to survive.

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I give him a moment to catch his breath while I get ready for the next part of the night. There are screams coming faintly through the wall from another room, and I smile softly. Someone else is having fun tonight.

He whimpers softly, and I glance up at him. He looks wretched.

Good.

He should pay for his actions, as was his request. He wanted the physical torture to match the torture of his soul, penance for losing the one he loved so much. There's not much that matters in this life. Except that there are those of us who can complete the contracts. That is most important. Without people like us, these tortured souls would stain society with their toxicity. Take Boy, for example. He killed his sister. Who would want that walking around? Even if it was an accident, accidents can be prevented with some care and forethought. All he had to do was ensure his sister was buckled in. He was clearly buckled in, because he survived. Why couldn't he extend the same courtesy and concern for safety to whatever his little sister's name was.

I don't really care, but he should. And I will make him care using the carefully selected methods that I have brought with me.

"Perhaps, because your sister will never walk this world again, I should give you the same gift," I murmur. "The gift of losing control of your legs."

I pick up the hammer once more. I could shatter his shins, make him feel immense pain without killing him. That is, after all, the goal. Pain without death, at least until the end.

Would I let him go? If he survived? Oh, but he wouldn't. He wouldn't survive what I have in store for him.

He needs to think he will, though, so maybe I'll call it a night.

I look at the hammer and smile.

Or not.

I walk over to him and raise the hammer, bringing it down on his shin, listening to the crunch of bone beneath it. I strike again and again, then go to the other leg and strike another three blows.

He cries out, begging me for mercy.

"Mercy?" I ask. "Mercy, when you couldn't even take care of your little sister."

"Please, just kill me already," he moans. "Please, I can't take it anymore."

"No, I will not have mercy on you, Boy," I say, looking at his stomach. "I will not bestow such a gift on you unless you survive until the end. In which case, yes, I will let you go. I will even help you if you survive, but you have to be resolute to survive. You have to want it more than anything. You have to want to live so much that no matter what I do to you, you will live."

It's true in a sense. If he did survive the end, I would help him. But I am confident he won't. I am confident that he will simply expire beneath me.

No one has ever survived my punishment.

They come in seeking the sweet relief of death from whatever ails them, and I make

their dreams come true. At much personal cost to myself at times. Supplies don't come cheap, and I lose time to sleep.

I put the hammer back in its place and go to the chest of drawers, where I pull out a box of sterilized needles. I go over to the bottom of the bed and pull one out. I insert it into the bloody bed of the big toe where I ripped the nail out. The soft flesh must be tender because he tries to jerk as he moans out.

I move onto the next toe and the one after that. I do the other foot and then I start on his fingers. I insert the needles carefully as he squints up at me through the harsh light that is still blinding him.

I then go back to the bathroom and take a Bluetooth speaker out of my purse. I plug it into the wall and put a classical composition on loop. It's cheery and sweet, something you could have done a jig to in the olden times.

"What... What is that?"

"Just something to help us with the sensory deprivation," I explain. "I won't be talking much in the coming days, so I wanted you to have something to listen to. Consider it a kindness."

"It's going to drive me insane," he gasps out.

"Hopefully, but if you have the will to survive, then you will survive," I say.

I start to pack up for the night and he moans some more words, but I ignore him. I wash my hands and put on my coat and purse, ready to brave the chilly night walk back. I remove the package on the bedside table and put it with the rest of my supplies. When I'm done, I'm going to pack all of this into the chest of drawers. I might need another chest if I'm not careful, because I've bought a lot of new items

for this contract.

Still, it will always come in useful for the next time. There's always someone looking to die. I look at Boy one last time before I exit, closing the door silently so he doesn't know if I've left or not. I stand there for a moment, and I can hear him calling out to me.

I smirk as I walk downstairs and leave the building. I'm tempted to visit the crematorium just for the smell, but it's late now, and I want to make sure Shiloh has at least practiced tonight. Otherwise, we're going to have a problem. Like Boy, she only has three more days to complete the deed. If she doesn't complete the task, I'm going to be very disappointed with her, and we don't want that.

We don't want that at all.

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As I walk back in the early hours of the morning, I can feel the shadows shrinking away. Something is on my mind, just out of reach. I can't quite place it.

It's making me feel unsettled.

It's not quite pre-dawn, but the shadows seem to sense that their time is coming to an end, much like I can sense mine is. At least with the Boy it is.

Three more nights. Tonight, I will torture him. Tomorrow, I have a grand plan and the day after will be the big finale. Shiloh has until I leave for the big finale to complete her task, or I will have to take her hand.

There is no one on the street at this time of night. People wouldn't think it was safe, whereas I think this is the safest time to be out. Monsters aren't afraid of other monsters, and I like to play.

I get home and shrug off my coat and purse. Putting them away, I go do my usual routine, and once I'm showered and in bed; I drift off. I don't wake up at my usual time, which in itself is strange, but what is really strange is the dream I had.

I dreamed the boy survived my final assault, and I had to free him and take him back to his parents. They forgave him and everything worked out for him in the end. He married a much older Shiloh, and they started a happy family together.

My eyes fly open as they seal their marriage with a kiss, and I gasp. I sit up and can feel myself shaking. Definitely unsettled. Something isn't right. I am in control. I am always in control.

I cannot complete the contract if I do not have myself in control.

This is a disaster.

I get up and go relieve myself, then splash water on my face before I brush my teeth. I get dressed and make my bed perfectly, feeling a bit better.

I walk to the kitchen and turn the coffee machine on after greeting Kerri and Shiloh. I turn to look at Kerri while the dark liquid drips out of the machine.

“I’m going to need you and Shiloh out of the house today, for the whole day. I want to get some cleaning done.”

“I can help if you like,” Kerri offers.

“No, no. I want to do a deep clean of everywhere, including your room. So, make sure all your valuables are packed away and take Shiloh out for the day. Go watch a movie and go to the amusement park. You have my card.”

Kerri nods, though she looks puzzled. I drink my coffee and start to get out my cleaning supplies, stacking them neatly in the bucket I have for them. I get a second bucket and fill it with soapy water.

Once Kerri leaves with Shiloh, I start scrubbing at the end of the hall and go into her room. It’s neat, but it’s not clean. I grab a cloth and begin to wipe down all the surfaces. Spraying bleach to disinfect everything and rinsing the cloth out in the soapy water. Then I get the vacuum and vacuum the room within an inch of its life. I get a small stepladder and clean the light fixtures, and I wash the windows both inside and out. As I clean, I feel my nerves start to settle. I can control this at least. I can control how clean the house is.

I move into Shiloh's room, which to the untrained eye would appear spotless. I complete the same order of things. Wiping down, vacuuming, cleaning the light fixtures and then washing the windows.

I take my time disinfecting the bathroom, cleaning every nook and cranny before I replace the water and throw the cloth in the washing machine, getting a new one for my room.

As I clean, I focus on my breathing, and I can feel my racing heart start to calm down. The boy will not survive, he cannot escape, and he certainly won't marry my daughter. I have plans for Shiloh, ones that do not require marriage.

I clean the living room and dining area that I use for special occasions. Then I start on the kitchen. I empty every cupboard and clean every corner. I wash all the dishes, especially those that haven't been used in a while. They are dusty.

My heart is now beating steadily, and I feel far more in control. I clean out my study and then go downstairs and clean the basement, feeling a lot more settled now.

The house is spotless, so I pack away the cleaning supplies, rinse out the buckets and put the clothes in for a wash cycle while I go make coffee.

I check the freezer and realize I need to go to the store. I can take Shiloh with me while Kerri prepares dinner. I take out a shopping list and jot down what it is I know we'll need. I stick it to the fridge with a magnet before I take out all the ingredients for dinner and set the ham to defrost in a basin of hot water.

I glance at the time. The store closes in two hours. I could go without Shiloh, but I want to talk to her. I need her to understand that time is running out. She needs to do what needs to be done.

I make another cup of coffee and sit at the kitchen table in silence. I don't move until the front door opens and Shiloh comes in, holding onto some teddy bears.

"Shiloh, while Kerri cooks dinner, we're going to the store. Keep your jacket on."

"Yes, Mommy," she says happily. She leaves to put her teddies down, and Kerri comes into the kitchen.

"I've taken out a ham for dinner, and you can make mashed potatoes and gravy with some vegetables," I say.

"Thank you, Esther. I'll get started right away. House smells great by the way."

"Thank you. I got all the cleaning done," I add, getting up. I put my cup in the dishwasher, retrieve the shopping list and get my coat and purse. "Come Shiloh," I call gently.

Shiloh comes up the passage and takes my hand as I lead her out of the house.

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As we walk into the supermarket, I hold Shiloh's hand tightly. I feel more in control, more myself. I can continue tonight. For now, though, I want to spend some quality time with my daughter.

Shiloh looks around the shop curiously, no doubt sizing up what she can ask me to buy for her. I get a cart and tell her to walk beside me.

We start in the meat section, where I carefully check the prices of the various cuts and start packing certain packages into the cart. Shiloh swings back and forth near me.

"Shiloh," I say quietly. "I thought you were going to practice."

"I haven't had a chance," she says, not quite as quietly.

"Hush. Now, how are you supposed to get done in the next three days if you're not practicing? I'm only giving you three more days. Not a day more."

"I know, Mommy," she says, swallowing hard.

"Are you scared?" I ask.

"It's just... no one else seems to do this kind of thing " she says.

"Have you talked to other people about it?" I ask, giving her a reproachful look.

"No, of course not. You said not to. But some kids have their au pairs for years, not

just a couple of months.”

“I know what’s best for you,” I say quietly as I push the cart. My voice is barely above a whisper. “And if I set you a task, you are to complete it. Do you understand me?”

“Yes, Mommy,” she says, though I can see her eyes shining as though she wants to cry.

Weakness. In its purest form. I may have to ponder her punishment because I don’t know if she’s strong enough to do what is required. Yet, maybe she will surprise me.

We go over to the frozen section, and I rifle through the various packs. I take out vegetables we can eat, some frozen quick and easy meals like fish fingers that Shiloh loves, and I pass it to her to pack in the cart. She packs it neatly, much like I would, and I only have to straighten it a little.

Next, we’ll need to restock on cleaning supplies. As we pass the toy aisle, Shiloh glances down it wistfully.

“Go pick something,” I say. “No more than twenty dollars.”

Shiloh smiles and runs down the aisle while I wait for her. I watch her choose carefully. She is concentrating so hard. How can she not apply the same concentration to the task I’ve set for her? She needs to dice up an au pair. It’s not rocket science.

She picks a set of barbies and comes running back. “Nineteen-ninety-nine,” she says breathlessly.

“Good girl,” I say with a smile. “Do you want to have a look at the knives while

we're here?"

She shakes her head and I'm disappointed. I know she can tell, because she instantly tries to perk up. "But we can. I just think we have enough blades at home."

"Oh, Shiloh, you can never have enough blades. Let's go take a look."

I lead her to where the guns and knives are kept, and I take her over to a display case. "You want something with a bit of weight, but not too heavy," I explain.

Shiloh nods. I've told her this before. But I need her to remember this lesson. Picking the correct blade is important. Picking the correct tool is always pertinent to a successful contract.

"See anything you like?" I ask quietly.

Shiloh shakes her head. "Nothing that speaks to me, Mommy."

I know it's a copout, but I leave it at that. "Machete, it is then," I say sternly. "I expect you to practice while Kerri is cooking dinner."

"What do I tell her when she asks me what I'm doing down in the basement?"

"Chores for Mommy," I say. "Don't elaborate on that."

Shiloh nods and looks at her Barbies longingly. No doubt she wanted to play with them as soon as she got home. Though there are more critical things to do.

"We need fresh bread and milk, and some coffee for the coffee machine, and then I think we're done. Can you go get me a box of milk?"

She nods and runs off as I call out to her, “I’ll be by the bread.”

I go there and choose the bread I want, and put it in the front of the cart where it won’t get squashed. I look around as I wait for Shiloh. People just pass me by, their masks and guards up. Happy housewives, grumpy husbands, and overexcited children. Everyone is pretending that life is okay and everything is going to be alright.

It’s sickening. I never want Shiloh to believe that kind of bullshit. Life is alright if you make it so. Don’t leave anything to chance. Don’t pretend to be what you’re not. I hear Shiloh huffing and puffing as she walks back to me with a box of long-life milk. She puts it on the bottom of the cart and smiles at me. I return the smile and lean down and kiss her forehead.

“Coffee and we can go home,” I say. “Mommy has somewhere to be tonight, so I’m going to eat dinner and let Kerri put you to bed.”

We get the coffee and check out. Shiloh helps me load the trunk with the groceries and we go straight home where Kerri is almost done with dinner. I send Shiloh to the basement to do her chores while I pack the groceries away. Tonight, the boy is going through his final night of light torture before I get into the real nitty gritty of what I have planned tomorrow night.

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I pull up and park my car outside La Douleur Folle and get out. I'm more excited about what I have planned for tomorrow than what I have planned for today, but all good things come to those who wait.

Boy should be excited. We're counting down to the end now. He thinks he's going to survive. At least he is holding onto a shred of hope that he will. I don't mind feeding into that. I like the taste of hope on my lips, especially when I know I will snuff it out.

The strange dream I had comes back to me briefly, and I pause outside the door to take a deep breath. I can hear the music still playing in the room and Boy's groans mingled with that.

I cannot talk tonight, or the auditory torture will not work. I slip into the room, and he turns his head as I shut the door.

"Is it you?"

I don't say anything. He can't see me, and I can see he's been crying. There's fresh blood on his feet, and it seems he has tried to free them but failed. I bring a water bottle to his lips, and he drinks from it generously. Still, I remain quiet.

I'm tempted to talk, don't get me wrong. I want to spark up that hope again. But I have set this up carefully, and psychological torture is just as important as physical torture.

I take out a little funnel and a balloon. I attach the balloon to the end of the funnel and secure it there, sealing it with super glue. I then take out a hose, the hammer and

some nails. Boy jumps when I stand on the bed, a foot either side of him. I hammer a nail into the wall above him, take some twine, and attach the funnel to the nail so it's hanging above his head. Then I take the hose and connect it to the tap in the bathroom, and feed the other part into the funnel. I turn the tap on and once the balloon is relatively expanded; I turn it on at a slower pace and poke a hole through the balloon. A drip of water hits Boy on the head.

Chinese Water Torture. That's what this is called. He gasps as another drop lands on his head, then it drips again and this time hits his cheek. Excellent, I'll just leave that on, and he can enjoy that.

"Please, make it stop."

I don't respond to his pleas. Instead, I get out my phone and text The Pharmacist for liquid Viagra. That will be useful for tomorrow. For tonight, though, I think another dose of adrenaline should help.

I tie a tourniquet around his arm and inject the substance quickly. He tries to wiggle his arm and hand but then cries out as the needle jerks beneath his skin.

"Please say something, anything," he begs.

I look at his stomach, noting that it has scabbed over from where I made several cuts into it with a blade. I lean over and pick at one of the scabs. Once I've got a corner up, I hold it tightly and rip it off. He moans and I start on the next one. I continue to pick the scabs off until all the cuts are trickling blood or pink and swollen—depending on how far they're healed.

He tries to turn his head this way and that to avoid the water, but nothing helps. I sit back and watch him. I look at his belly button. Once a source of life for him. He's got an outie. I don't think he needs it anymore. I retrieve my scalpel and pull up a chair

beside him. I wipe the area with an alcohol swab.

“No, what are you doing?”

Starting with a small incision, I cut all around the belly button. He cries out and coughs up some blood, but I don't stop. I've created such a neat little circle around it. I slip the blade under the skin and separate the skin from the tissue before I finish cutting out the belly button completely.

I set it aside and spray bleach on the wound, causing Boy to cry out once more.

“Please, I'm begging you. Please make it stop.”

I spray the wound again and dab at it with an alcohol swab. Tears leak from his eyes as he groans. I don't know how much more he can take, but I don't plan on stopping, so he had best find some resolve.

I could turn the music off and speak, just to give him hope. Perhaps I will. Maybe later, after he's been tortured a little more. I see he's still turning his head this way and that, trying to avoid that infuriating drip of water. Too bad he's pretty much fixed in place and can't move.

I sit back in my seat and simply watch him in silence. He tries to speak a few times, but he doesn't actually get any words out. I inspect his ribs. They are blackened where I struck them with a hammer. His shins too. I'll be lucky if he doesn't form a clot.

I touch his ribs gently, and he hisses in pain. I trace them slowly, ignoring his whimpers. I trace my hand down his abdomen to his shins and he cries out. His cries are so delicious. I know I am doing a good job when they can't stop from crying out, even if they are in the worst kind of pain.

I look at the needles in his toes and the carpet grips attached to his feet. I run a finger over the needles. He tries again to move his feet, to no avail. He can't curl his toes away from me because of the carpet grippers.

I move back up his body and inspect the blisters where I burned him with a cigarette. I lean down and kiss them softly, enjoying the fleshy feel against my lips.

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I make my decision. I will give him true hope and let him rest tonight in preparation for tomorrow night. I need to tend to him tonight and ensure he feels like there is going to be a chance.

I start by turning off the lamps, and I hear him sigh. I turn off the music and stand above him. He still squints at me. His eyes will need time to recover from the lamp's bright light.

"There, there, Boy," I croon quietly, in the tone I would use for Shiloh if she'd hurt herself or was feeling unwell. "It's going to be okay."

He nods and licks his lips.

I retrieve the hammer and set it on the bedside table.

"Do you promise?"

"I promise this will all be over soon," I say quietly.

I offer him some water and he drinks it greedily. Then, I slowly remove the needles from his fingers. I use the hammer to extract the nail securing his hand to the plank underneath.

I go to the other hand and repeat the process. He moans softly and I can't tell if it's from pain or relief. I move to his feet, where I slowly remove the duct tape and pull the carpet grippers off. Then, I carefully remove the needles from his toes before I remove the nails that are keeping his feet secure to the plank. With some effort, I

remove the planks from under him, but I do not unstrap him. I finally remove the funnel, hose, and balloon from above his head.

“You need to rest,” I say gently. “Rest and I’ll come back tomorrow to check on you. Sleep while you can.”

He nods and is already shutting his eyes. He is exhausted and drifting off already.

I pack up and clean up all I can before I wash my hands and grab my coat and purse and head out the door. As I do, I nearly bump into someone.

“Esther. So nice to see you,” Priscilla says. “My, but you’ve kept this one going for so long.”

She struggles to speak clearly. She had to have lip surgery. Rumor is that he did it to her, the one who slipped into madness. I thought she looked ugly before, but it looks worse now.

“It was a special request,” I say coolly. I don’t particularly like talking to her. I don’t like talking to anyone I don’t have to.

“Yes, I heard it’s coming to an end, though. How is our guest doing?”

“He’s fine. He’s resting for tomorrow’s big, pre-finale special.”

“I’d love to watch,” she says, “If you’d have me.”

“I’d prefer it to be private,” I say calmly. “Is my bill settled?”

“Not quite. There is a matter of a thousand dollars that is still owed from the last participant.”

“Contract,” I say. “They are nothing more than contracts.”

“Of course, forgive me. Your last contract .”

I nod slowly. “I’ll leave the thousand dollars with your assistant downstairs tomorrow night. I don’t have it on me right now.”

“That’s fine.” Priscilla waves me off. “Nothing wrong with that. I assume you’ll be cleaning this one up as well when you’re done.”

“You’ll need a new bed, I imagine,” I say thoughtfully. “I’ll pay for it. Just put it on my bill.”

“Very well,” Priscilla says. “I have to go, but it was nice catching up with you.”

She walks away and I watch her for a moment before I head downstairs. I don’t even acknowledge the assistant sitting in reception. It’s a new rule that no one is allowed to use her for anything. Not since he made a mess of things with the previous one.

I get into my car and take a deep breath. I don’t believe in mercy, but I like the taste of hope. I’ll give Boy this night to enjoy it, but tomorrow night the fun begins in earnest. I put my car into gear and then pause. I get out again and walk around the back of the building to the cliff that overlooks the city park. It is beautiful up here. I admire the way the night engulfs everything. I take a few deep breaths. Shiloh will do as I say—I know she won’t want to disappoint me. But I wonder if I should have made her do it sooner. It seems like she has built a personal connection with Kerri now. That can’t help matters.

I frown deeply before I sigh softly and turn away from the cliff. Walking back to my car, I get in and start driving home. I check the mailbox and find the package from the Pharmacist that I requested. I take it inside and set it on my desk in my study.

Everyone is asleep. I peek in on Shiloh, who is sleeping in a mass of teddy bears, and then I peek in on Kerri, who is in one piece and asleep in her bed.

To say I'm disappointed takes it to a whole new level. She is running out of time, and I don't know how to make her take this more seriously.

Kerri cannot leave with her life. She needs to be disposed of. I had taken great lengths for post-Kerri to have left and found a job abroad. Now all that was left was for Shiloh to hold up her end of the bargain, so that I can put everything in place.

Maybe I should explain how I will dispose of the body. Maybe she's worried about that. I'll speak to her tomorrow and see what I can do about easing her troubles. I know it's a big first task, but she's old enough to take it on. I was younger than her the first time I killed somebody.

I shower and change, then brush my teeth before I climb into bed. I'm a little worried about what to do with Shiloh, and ultimately, Kerri.

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I'm awake before both Kerri and Shiloh, so I make breakfast. Fried eggs on toast, bacon, sausages, and fried tomatoes. I put their plates down as they walk in.

Kerri looks surprised. "Thank you, Esther, you didn't have to do this."

"I have a special surprise for you this week," I say, looking at Shiloh. "And I wanted to start it off today with a nice hearty breakfast. You can have all of today off, and also tomorrow morning. I want to spend some time with Shiloh, and you've been so good at taking care of her."

Kerri blushes. "It's my job. You don't have to reward me."

"I know. I pay you to take care of her, but you seem to have a good connection with her, and I want to honor that." I pour Kerri some coffee and set it down before I get Shiloh some orange juice.

I pour my own coffee and join them at the table. We fall into a comfortable silence as we eat. Kerri scrolls on her phone while Shiloh looks preoccupied. I hope she's thinking of a plan to take Kerri out, but I'll know soon enough.

When we're finished breakfast, I shoo Kerri out to go enjoy her day off and I load the dishwasher, turning it on. I look at Shiloh, who looks up at me with big eyes.

"Basement," I say calmly.

Shiloh gets up and leads me downstairs. She keys in the four-digit pin number into the keypad before we enter, and I shut the door behind me.

“So, what’s your plan?” I ask, sitting in a chair in the corner. “You have had all week to think about it.”

She stands at the table and traces her finger along the machete blade.

“You need to slit her throat,” I begin, “So she can’t scream for help, and then use the machete to take off her arms and legs. Don’t worry about any mess. I’ll clean it up.”

Shiloh looks at me and nods.

“I don’t think you’re taking this seriously at all, Shiloh.” I sigh. Standing up, I go over to the table and kneel in front of her so we’re the same height. “I don’t think you’ve come up with a plan at all. In fact, I think you’re stalling for more time.”

Shiloh shakes her head, but I can see the guilt in her eyes. She’s lying.

She is lying to me .

I nod and get up, handing her the machete. “Practice on the wood,” I say.

She nods and takes the machete over to the wood, where she positions herself and takes a swing. I sit back in the corner and when she is running out of wood; I go fetch some more.

Kerri’s gone out, as I knew she would, so I leave the basement door open. I come back down, and I see Shiloh has stopped.

“Did I say you could stop?” I ask as I drop the wood in front of her.

“My arm is tired,” she whines.

“Don’t whine,” I say pointedly. “I will not have some whiney little brat for a daughter. You will do as you’re told, and you know it.” I sit back down. “Go again.”

Shiloh begins to cry as she swings the machete, and I don’t let up until Midday. When I stand up, she looks at me and I hold my hand out for the machete. “You have the strength to do it, Shiloh, now you just need to find the resolve.” She stands at the table while I sharpen the machete and place it back there. “Come, we’re going out. Go put your coat on.”

“Where are we going?” she asks quietly.

“To have lunch. After tomorrow, you’re going to be a big girl, a woman, in fact. I want to celebrate early.”

Shiloh looks hesitant but goes upstairs to put her coat on. I get my own coat and purse before I lead her and strap her into the car seat. “After tomorrow, you won’t need a car seat anymore,” I say proudly. “You are tall enough to sit without one, but you will still sit in the back.”

“Yes, Mommy,” she says. She should be excited, but I can tell she’s not. She’s mulling over what needs to be done in her mind. She knows she needs to kill Kerri. I’ve been prepping her for this moment her entire life. I didn’t expect Kerri to become such a personal attachment to her.

“What have I said about personal relationships?”

“They’re no good,” Shiloh says. She is looking out the window at this point.

“Are you attached to Kerri?” I ask, more curious to know if she will lie again or not.

“No, Mommy,” she lies. “I’m not. I will do it, I promise. I just want the time to be

right.”

I nod but don’t say anything further. We get to the restaurant, and I ask the hostess to sit us outside in the fresh air.

Shiloh examines the menu carefully and then looks at me. “What can I have?”

“Anything you want,” I say with a soft smile. “It’s your celebration.”

She nods, but she doesn’t look happy. The reason we’re celebrating is what is holding her back. She looks back at the menu and then says, “I want spaghetti.”

“Then you will have spaghetti.” The waitress comes back, and I order a glass of non-alcoholic wine for myself, and a fruit juice for Shiloh. “Then we want one adult’s spaghetti and one steak–rare, with roast potatoes and creamed spinach.”

The waitress writes everything down and takes our menus. She promises to be back soon and leaves.

I look at Shiloh, who is fidgeting with her hands in her lap. She doesn’t want to do this. That has become abundantly clear, and I know I’m going to have to deal with this my own way.

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Throughout lunch I ponder what to do, before I reach the most logical conclusion. Shiloh needs to face the consequences for her actions. So, as we finish, I lean on the table and talk quietly.

“Shiloh, if you don’t do what you need to, you are going to be punished. Do you understand that?”

“Yes, Mommy,” she says quietly.

“You have until tomorrow evening to do what is necessary. Before dinner, or else.”

“Yes, Mommy,” she repeats, though she’s lost all the color in her face. Any enjoyment of the meal is also lost, so I call for the bill.

I pay with my credit card, and I think of the boy as I lead Shiloh out. I hope he’s well rested for tonight. What I have planned for him is going to be extraordinary.

I decide to cheer Shiloh up and stop at the local toy store.

She looks up at me hopefully as we exit the car, and I smile. “Pick any teddy bear you want.”

She returns my smile, forgetting her sadness like only a child can. We hurry into the toy store, and she looks around excitedly.

She strolls down the aisles, making sure she weighs all her options. It’s frustrating to see that she can take so much care in selecting a toy, but can’t be bothered to do as

I've instructed.

I need to go for a run and a shower before tonight. I've been neglecting my physical form and I'm going to have to be on top form tomorrow. One way or another.

I'm by no means a muscle-woman, but I can lift a dead body, and that has to count for something. Dead weight is the worst weight to lift.

Shiloh picks out a large white teddy bear that is a bit scruffy looking. He has round glasses on and a bowtie. She comes over and shows him to me. "This is the one I want. His name is Grandpa."

"Okay, let's go pay," I say, leading her to the counter where the clerk is watching us. I pay for the teddy bear, and soon enough, we're on our way back home. When we walk in, I look at Shiloh and regret giving Kerri the whole day off. But Shiloh is old enough to watch herself while I go run for an hour.

I put her in her room and go change into my running clothes. I tell her I'll be back in an hour and leave. I start off by jogging slowly, warming up my body. I turn down the road and head towards the nearby park. There are lots of running trails there. The fresh air will help me think.

I turn into the park and jog a little faster. Once I join the running trail, I start to run, keeping my breathing as even as I can. When I get to the center of the park, I stop to catch my breath.

I'm not out of shape, but I can feel that if I leave it any longer, I'm going to lose what fitness I have. I need to start working out every day again. I have gym equipment in the garage; I just need to use it.

I look around at the people using the surrounding trails. There are a lot of couples out

walking together or with their children. All talking as though this is the best day of their lives. It's all a circus act, none of them are genuinely happy. None of them understand what true loss and pain is. Without that, they cannot understand joy and hope.

I look at the nearby coffee cart where people are queuing to get a drink, and I shake my head. Such a cliché thing to do, run until you can have some coffee then run back. So pointless.

I start to jog up my favorite lesser-known trail. I'll take a shortcut through the trees to get back to the park exit and then continue to run home. I pick up speed and I can feel my heart hammering in my chest as I do my cardio.

Out here in the sunlight, I have to appear to be one of them, but I'm not. I'm not like them. I don't wear a mask. I don't lie. If someone were to ask me right out if I did contracts, I would tell them. It's nothing to be ashamed of. I just don't volunteer that information, because if I'm locked away, who will help the needy?

I turn onto our street and slow down to a walk, breathing hard. I'm sweaty and gross and I see the front door of my house is open and Shiloh is sitting on the front step playing with her Barbie dolls.

"Get inside," I bark. "You know you're not allowed out on your own."

"I was waiting for you," she protests. She gathers her dolls and goes inside. "I'm sorry."

I kneel down. "Someone could take you. The world is filled with horrible people, Shiloh. There is only me and you, and then there is everyone else. Do you understand me?"

“What about Kerri?” she asks quietly.

“You know what Kerri is to us,” I say. “I’m going to shower, then I’ll make us some dinner. Then I want you to go straight to bed. That’s your punishment for wandering out front.”

“Yes, Mommy,” she says quietly, going to her room.

I shower and change. Only this time, I dress a little seductively. A set of sexy underwear under a blouse and tight yoga pants. I come out and start on dinner; making us sandwiches from the leftover ham, and then I call Shiloh. When we’re done eating, I tuck her into bed and warn her that she had better go straight to sleep.

I leave through the front door after grabbing the package from my desk. Deciding to welcome the shadows, I walk again tonight. After all, tonight I’m going to feel completely rejuvenated. Tonight is going to be very special. Boy isn’t going to know what hit him, and I think the only thing that could surpass this will be the finale.

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The sun is already starting to set, and couples walk on the pavement with their children and pets. A lone cat wanders out of a yard and rubs itself against me. I bend down and pet it before I continue on my way. Some guys whistle at me, but I pay them no mind.

No, I focus on one thing and one thing only. My own satisfaction tonight. There are many ways to satiate me, but this one will do nicely. A combination of adrenaline and Viagra—one to keep him awake and another to keep him stimulated. What fun I'm going to have.

When I enter the room, the smell has not gotten any better. I decided earlier that I would clean before I got started. I want everything pristine for the grand finale.

"You're back," he groans. "Please, can I go home now?"

"Our week together is almost up," I say quietly. "I don't break contracts, but like I said, if you survive what I have in store for you, then you're welcome to go home."

He looks at me with a pained expression, and I take my coat and purse and put it in the bathroom. I get a bucket and fill it with ice cold water, then set it next to the bed.

I pull the sheet out from under him, keeping most of the shit and piss on it. I take it out of the room in a bundle and dump it next to the stairs. I'll burn it later. I go back in and pick up the bucket of water, dumping it onto Boy's groin area. I get a scrubbing brush out and begin to scrub him clean, spraying bleach on the dirtiest areas. I scrub off all the nasty shit that has crusted on his skin since he's been lying in it all week long. He groans and asks me to stop, but I don't. I simply lift his penis and

scrub his scrotum. Then I scrub his ass, which is the nastiest of them all. I get a second bucket of water and dump it on him before I take a towel and dry him off, then the bed. The bed is wet, but that doesn't matter. The blood from his wounds has soaked into the mattress, and now that the stench of shit is gone, I can smell the coppery scent of blood.

He tugs on his restraints, but I've tied him up securely. He can't move. I go to the bathroom and wheel out a little trolley with a tray on top. I take out my tools slowly.

I put a fresh scalpel down. Then a blow torch that I normally use on Crème Brûlée. I take out a branding iron that is a solid rectangle shape. Finally, I take out gloves. I don't normally wear gloves, but this requires a delicate touch if I'm going to get it right.

"What... what are you doing?" he asks. He's too weak to even lift his head. I get my seat again and bring it to the bedside before I open the package I brought with me.

I smile and say, "We're going to have some wild fun tonight."

"Please don't hurt me anymore," he pleads.

I tie a tourniquet on his arm and inject him with adrenaline first. While that courses through his body, I take out the other injection from the new package and move to his flaccid cock. I insert the needle carefully and squeeze the plunger just a little. I remove it and inject it again, a little lower down. Then I move to the other side and inject him there.

I sit back and watch. At first, nothing happens at all, but then his penis starts to stiffen. I'm surprised my idea worked with the adrenaline coursing through his body, but he manages to get an erection, which is all I wanted.

I smile. “I need to burn those sheets. You relax a little while I do that, and when I come back, we can start.”

He doesn’t answer me, but he is now panting. I go outside and grab the sheets, taking them to the crematorium. I shove them in and turn it on. I take my time, watching the sheets disintegrate into nothing.

This side of La Douleur Folle is probably my favorite. It’s quieter here. This is where we dispose of everything so nothing will ever be discovered. This is the ultimate end of the contract. No remains. No memory.

Except for those who think their loved one simply left and didn’t come back.

I wonder how many fathers went out for a pack of cigarettes, only to come to La Douleur Folle and end everything. I wonder how many didn’t make it back home. There are those who partake in pain alone, not death, but those are far, far few between.

I walk back towards the main rooms. I can hear a cacophony of screams and howls of pain, and it’s like music to my ears. There are only a few rooms that have soundproofing; mine is one of them. I like the sensory deprivation of it. The others, not so much. I’m surprised that no one has ever walked past here by accident and wondered who was being murdered.

Oh, so many people. But they chose to die. They come here so that we may give them death. They sing for it. They beg for it. They don’t know the value of life if they enter a hell like this, and they don’t deserve a life to go back to.

I reach my room and take a deep breath. It’s showtime. I’m almost excited. I’m not one to do this sort of thing, but when I thought of it, I thought it was genius. An end to creating the life I brought forth into this world before I end the life itself.

I enter the room with a wide grin on my face and shut the door.

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The boy turns his head and catches a glimpse of my grin, and what little color he has in his face drains away. I approach the side where my chair is, and I slowly undo my blouse as I walk toward the bathroom. I fold it neatly and put it with my coat and purse, and then I shimmy out of my yoga pants, fold them neatly and put them with the blouse.

I walk back out and smile brightly. “Are you ready to have fun?”

“You’re... you’re raping me?” he gasps out. “What the fuck?”

I look at his erection. Just like I suspected; he was a grower. It’s long and thick and I smirk.

“I told you we’re going to have some fun. This is the special before the finale. You’re going to enjoy this.”

“Please, if I do this willingly, will you let me go?”

“No, not before the finale.” I look at him sternly. “I don’t need you to do this willingly.” I grab hold of his cock, and he groans. “Is that sore? Or pleasurable?”

I start to stroke him. His hips involuntarily move as I move my hand. I keep my eyes trained on his erection as though it is the most fascinating thing I’ve ever seen.

“Have you ever been with a woman before?” I ask quietly. “Have you ever had sex?”

“Not... not really...” he admits.

I smile. “Have you ever had a blow job?”

“No...” He groans, I can’t tell if it’s from pleasure or pain.

I stop stroking him and I see him relax a little. His hips still move slightly, as though he’s uncomfortable.

“Do you like my breasts?” I ask, standing over him. I reach forward and unclasp the bra, and my ample breasts come tumbling out of the cups, dangling in front of him.

“Ye... yes...” he answers hesitantly. It sounds like he’s trying to give me the answers I want, as though he can please me.

“They’re full and soft,” I say, reaching up to massage them in front of him. “And they taste so good.” I bring one up to my mouth and just manage to catch the nipple, sucking on it gently.

His eyes are trained on me, just the way I want them. I climb onto the bed and hover above him. It’s been a long time since I’ve pleasured myself, and if I don’t get any satisfaction sexually, I won’t mind. I just want to drive him out of his mind. How else am I going to achieve my goal?

I rub myself against his hard cock. The cloth from my thong teases along the skin of his penis. His hips move slightly, and he closes his eyes. I move the thong to one side and slowly guide him inside of me. I start to move, not bothering to be gentle. I can see he’s in pain from the movement, but I can also tell from his throbbing dick that he’s having some pleasure.

Yes! Be pleased. Be happy. Have hope.

I continue to move, reaching down to touch myself as I do. I can feel the stirrings

inside of me. I groan out and bring my fingers up to my mouth to lick them. His eyes are open again and he's watching me with a pained look on his face, when I suddenly stop moving. I get off of him and start to stroke him. "Are you close?"

"Yes," he groans.

"Good."

I take the scalpel and lift his ball sack. His screams are the biggest yet as I cut it off. Making sure to stop the vas deferens from leaking. I lift his balls to my mouth, and finding the vas deferens, I suck the seminal fluid out of them. All the while, he is screaming. I go closer to him and lean over him, spitting the seminal fluid into his mouth before putting a hand over it.

"Swallow it and I'll stop the bleeding, and you won't die."

He is still trying to scream, but he's coughing now as he chokes.

He swallows, and I swallow with him before I toss his ball sack to the ground with a squelch. I stand on it as I walk back to the tools. He's screaming again, coughing, choking on blood and semen. I turn on the blowtorch and start heating the brand.

"We need to cauterize the wound," I say loudly over his screams. "Otherwise, you'll bleed to death. Don't worry, they're just balls. You can live without them."

Once the brand is hot, I look at his still erect dick. I smile and look at him as he stares at me with wide eyes.

"No. no. no. no. no. no."

I press the brand to the wound, and it sizzles. He screams so loudly for a moment, and

then there's silence. I look up. He's passed out from the pain. I hold the brand there longer, hoping he'll wake up, but he doesn't. I remove it and check the wound. Nice and clean. I take bleach and spray it over the charred skin, and wipe it with an alcohol swab just to be sure. I don't want him to die between now and tomorrow night.

He would be so proud of what I have planned. Of course, it's of his own making. I just found and claimed it.

Oh, the excitement.

I pack everything away and put it back in its places. I pack the things that are still out back into the chest of drawers, and I glance at the wooden box inside the top drawer. I take it out and place it in the corner where I can easily access it tomorrow.

I check the boy is still breathing, and I smirk. Not even the adrenaline could help him stay conscious. It must be wearing off. I could give him more, but I think I'm done for the night.

Tomorrow is going to be a very special day for both him and Shiloh. I want to make it perfect. I have everything planned out to the letter.

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I've made breakfast again, and I wait patiently for Kerri and Shiloh to join me at the table. I have the day planned out perfectly and Shiloh can use it to her advantage. This is her last chance to prove to me she's ready to be a woman.

Otherwise, there will be consequences. I can't let this go unpunished.

They come in and look surprised to see me there sipping on my coffee.

"Morning ladies," I say cheerfully. "I have a special day planned for us. We're going to the zoo." I smile broadly. "All three of us."

Kerri smiles. "Sounds amazing, Esther. We haven't been to the zoo in a long time."

"I love all the animals," Shiloh says confidently.

I smile. "I know, that's why I chose it. Then we will come home, relax a little, and have a special dinner."

Shiloh starts to eat her breakfast, and Kerri makes herself some coffee before she starts to eat. Once we're done, Kerri loads up the dishwasher, and then we get our coats and purses and leave the house. As I strap Shiloh in, I whisper, "Today is the day."

She looks up at me worriedly, but I give her a reassuring smile. Kerri climbs into the car and I give her another smile before I shut the door.

I drive us to the zoo, which isn't far away. I locate a parking space and pay our

entrance fee. Shiloh holds Kerri's hand tightly as we walk past the first lot of animals. They want to tarry there, but I urge them to follow me to the very spot I want to go.

It's a continuous walkway with throngs of people with children stopping at each animal cage exclaiming over them. The herbivores are nothing but fodder to me. Their cages smell like shit. Literally.

There's only one place I want to go.

The carnivores.

We stop first at the African lion, and I smile broadly. "In my opinion, carnivores are the most important thing in the ecosystem. Take the African lion. If they weren't there, the bucks would multiply and eat all the grassland and there would be devastation. Carnivores have a really important role to play in the feeding chain." We walk to the next enclosure. "Take the hyena as another example. They're our cleaners. They clean up the mess that the lions make. They're like the housemaids of the African bush. Nothing goes to waste. Nothing is left behind."

As we work our way over to each carnivore, I make sure to let them know a little fact about why they're important, but I don't stop there. Once we're feeling a bit weary from the sun beating down upon us, I take them indoors to the reptile section, and explain their purposes, and then to the aviary where the vultures are kept.

Kerri seems fascinated with my little talk, but Shiloh is giving me a knowing look. She understands what I'm referring to. As Kerri watches a vulture eat, I take Shiloh aside and kneel down. "You give me a signal when you're ready, and I will keep watch and help you, if need be, okay?"

Shiloh nods, but I can't tell what she is thinking. I just hope she's reconsidered her decision.

We continue to talk about the animals as we make our way towards the restaurant in the middle of the zoo. Kerri finds us a table outside and we all look at the menu.

Kerri leans over to Shiloh and points out the kiddies' items and I smile. "No need. She's a big girl now. She can order whatever she likes. Today is a special day, after all."

"What are we celebrating exactly, Esther?"

"Just that Shiloh is almost a woman, and life deserves celebration. We should all celebrate life more often."

Kerri smiles. "That's a lovely sentiment. I hope Shiloh learns from this that it's okay to celebrate even the smallest of things."

"I hope so too," I say. "And how important it is that everything has its place in the food chain. You're either eaten or eating." I grin.

Kerri looks at me curiously, but doesn't comment. The waitress comes over and we order our lunch. Kerri is having a toasted sandwich, which Shiloh decides she also wants. I order a venison steak—rare.

Kerri laughs. "Oh, I can't eat rare. That coppery taste is too much for me."

"That's the best part," I say honestly. "I love it."

Shiloh pulls a face as our food is delivered, and I cut into the steak. The blood drips from it and I smile. We eat in silence, mostly. Every now and then Kerri imparts a fact about animals to Shiloh and what they are famous for. She talks about the pandas in China, and I grow easily bored by the idle chitchat.

Once we're done, we get ice creams to finish our walk with. Shiloh happily licks at hers, Her free hand clinging to Kerri's as we make our way back to the car.

I strap Shiloh in and wait for Kerri to strap herself in before I start to drive. "I think I'll prepare a nice dinner for us tonight. Something tasty so the celebration can continue."

"I don't know if I can eat anymore. I'm quite full."

"You say that now, Kerri, but you'll be hungry later. I'm sure Shiloh will be."

Kerri smiles at me as I park the car in front of my garage. "Why don't you two go get changed, and I'll put a pot of coffee on."

They both agree and we walk inside. Shiloh watches as I go downstairs to the basement and unlock it.

Leaving it open, I come back upstairs and turn the coffeemaker on. I pull out a mug and set it down, straightening the handle. I smile triumphantly to myself.

Today, my girl becomes a woman.

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I make my coffee and listen carefully for Shiloh's signal, and when it doesn't come; I go to the living room and sit on the sofa. Looking out onto the street, I see clouds starting to close in—a sign of the day to come. I prefer cloudy days, and I hope it rains after the heat we've had. I watch as a couple sits on their front lawn while their children run through sprinklers. An old man walks his dog on the curb, greeting everyone he passes. He must be lonely.

I get lost in thought for a moment until I realize that I haven't been listening for Shiloh's signal and it's deathly quiet.

I decide to go check on her. I put the coffee mug in the dishwasher as I pass the kitchen, and then knock on Shiloh's door. There's no answer. I open it and her clothes are discarded on her bed, but there's no sign of her. Feeling hopeful, I cross to Kerri's room. Maybe I missed her signal when I was deep in thought. I should make sure she's okay.

I open Kerri's room, but there's no sign of them there either. I check my office and they're not there, so I proceed to the basement. Did Kerri follow her down there? Is my daughter in danger?

I descend the stairs silently, listening intently for any sound. I can hear talking and I stop just at the door to listen. It's Shiloh talking.

“So, my mom has all these weapons, and she's been telling me to kill you with them.”

“Shiloh, that's ridiculous.”

“Look at all these weapons,” she insists. “And she had me practice by chopping into the wood. She said that in order for me to become a woman, I had to slit your throat and chop you up. She’s been on about it entire week.”

“Shiloh...”

I step into the doorway. “I would listen to her if I were you,” I say calmly.

Shiloh looks at me scaredly, and backs up against the wall. “We’ll talk later,” I say to her.

Kerri gives me a warning glance and picks up a knife from the table. I approach from the side, pulling the door shut behind me.

“What are you going to do with that, Kerri?”

“I’m going to defend us,” she says confidently. “I’m taking Shiloh and we’re going to the police station.”

“That can’t happen, I’m afraid,” I say. “Good thing I just changed the pin on the door so Shiloh can’t let you out.”

I look at my daughter, who is trembling in the far corner. Kerri holds the knife up. “I’m warning you, I will attack you.”

I slip my hand behind me and open a drawer, taking out a gun. Crude as it is, I only keep it for emergencies; after all it’ll serve its purpose now. I approach Kerri slowly. “Shiloh, I gave you a direct instruction, and you disobeyed me. Now you will have to be punished.”

“You’re not going to touch her!” Kerri yells, but she’s frightened. She can see I have

something behind my back.

“Give me the knife.” I hold my hand out.

Kerri darts forward and stabs. I move at the last minute, but she manages to slice into my skin. Blood trickles down my arm. I pull the gun out and point it at her. “If you don’t want to die, I suggest you put the knife down.”

Kerri looks at me wide-eyed. “Believe me,” I say. “You would be dead before you reached me. My aim is deadly.”

“Please, Mommy, let Kerri go.”

“We can’t do that now because you spilled our little secret,” I spit viciously.

Kerri slowly drops the knife and holds her hands up, backing into the corner with Shiloh.

“Shiloh, get the cable ties and cuff Kerri’s hands behind her back.”

Trembling, Shiloh does as I ask, and I come forward. “Turn around, Kerri.”

She obeys, and I pull on the cable ties so they’re as tight as they can go. Kerri hisses in pain. “Get me another,” I say.

Shiloh gets one and comes back.

“Turn around,” I say.

“Mommy please...”

“Turn around,” I order her.

I cuff her hands together tightly and smile. “Why don’t you both sit down while I prepare us for what’s coming.”

“You’re going to kill me in front of your own daughter?”

“Perhaps,” I say. “I haven’t decided yet.”

Kerri squirms. “Kill me, but let her live. She’s just ten years old, dammit.”

“She shouldn’t have gotten attached to you,” I say. “That was her mistake. And mine.”

I retrieve a syringe full of liquid from the drawer and move over to them.

“What’s that?” Kerri screams. “Help us! We’re in the basement!”

“It’s soundproof, so yelling is pretty pointless,” I say as I jab the syringe into her leg and press the plunger. I do about half a dose, and then jab Shiloh. I don’t care much for sterility right now.

Once they both pass out, I put the gun away and lug them upstairs. It’s gotten dark outside since I came down to the basement. I leave them lying in the hallway and go to park my car in the garage. Once it’s shut, I drag them through the side door and load them into the boot of the car. They are squished, but they just about fit.

They’ve left me no choice.

Shiloh has left me no choice.

I get my coat and purse and back the car out, closing the garage behind me. They're out cold the entire drive and when I get to La Douleur Folle , I carry them–Kerri with some difficulty–up to my room.

If anyone sees me, they don't stop me.

I set them down, leaning against the chest of drawers, and look at the boy. "I'm a little earlier than I'd like, but I have a special surprise for you. We're going to have witnesses tonight."

"You said I could go," he gasps out.

"I said if you survive, you can go. There's one ultimate act that I need to do to complete this circle, and if you can survive that, then you can survive anything."

I look at Kerri and Shiloh. "We'll just wait for them to wake."

Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 1:23 pm

I sit and wait patiently for the girls to revive. The boy tries to speak to me, to make me see reason, but I don't care. He can speak until he's hoarse. I have had this planned every step of the way. I knew the moment that Shiloh wasn't going to do as I asked that she would need to be taught a lesson, but I never thought she would betray me like this.

Still, her punishment was inevitable. She had a task she did not complete, and like every good mother, I must see she suffers the consequences of not listening.

Kerri wakes up first and looks around groggily. I smile and say, "Wakey wakey, Kerri."

"Where are we?" she asks. "Did you drug us?"

"Yes, and where we are is not important, but what we have come to do is."

"Shiloh!" she exclaims, looking at the girl to her side.

Shiloh stirs and my grin broadens. "There's my beautiful daughter."

"Where... are we?" Shiloh asks. Then she screams as she sees the naked boy on the bed.

I ignore her and approach the bed. "Boy, meet Kerri and Shiloh. Shiloh and Kerri, meet Boy. His name is not important as he's come here with a specific purpose in mind. See, Boy wanted to die, and that's a service I provide."

“I’ve changed my mind!” he tries to yell.

“Hush,” I say, pressing a finger to his lips. “Now, I’ve said if he can survive the next thing, then he can go home. I have my doubts, but he seems hopeful. Don’t you, Boy?”

“My family will come looking for me,” he says. “They’ll arrest you and throw you in jail.”

“Now, I have no doubt your parents will look for you.” I smile. “But you didn’t tell them where you were going. No one is coming for you, Boy. Now why don’t we get into the last act?”

I reach for the wooden box that’s sitting in the corner of the room, smiling that I finally get to use it. He was one of the best we had here until the madness took him, but he left this behind and I claimed it as mine.

I open it and take out the machete strap on. Kerri looks at me with wide eyes as I pull it onto myself and strap it into place.

“You girls watch how it’s done. Otherwise, there will be punishment for you. If you look away, I’ll stop, and he’ll suffer. If you watch, I’ll make it quick.”

Shiloh looks at me, tears streaming down her face. But she doesn’t say anything. She was expecting punishment, but not this.

Don’t worry, you won’t be traumatized for long.

I get between the boy’s legs, and he shrieks. “What the fuck are you doing?”

“The final act, silly goose,” I say with a chuckle. I line the machete up with his anus and lean forward on both hands. I thrust deeply inside of him, and his shrieks fill the

room. I look to see if the girls are watching, but they're looking away.

"If you don't watch, I'll just go slower," I thunder over his screams.

Kerri looks up tentatively, and so does Shiloh. She understands that her watching ties directly to this boy's suffering.

They're both crying now as I start to thrust. The blood gushes out of the boy and onto my pants. His shrieks take forever to die down and I thrust harder until eventually, he is lifeless.

I pull out of him and tut. "He didn't survive. Guess he doesn't get to go home."

"Please let us go. We won't tell anyone about this."

I leave the bloody strap-on on while I get more cable ties and tie their legs. "I'll clean up the boy last," I say thoughtfully, taking the machete off before going into the hallway. In the supply room, I pull out a gurney and wheel it to my room. I wrangle both girls onto it and put up the sides.

"What are you going to do with us?" Kerri screams as I push her out the door. "Why are you doing this?"

I smile at her, but I don't say anything. Shiloh is sobbing now. I push them all the way to the crematorium. Once there, I wrestle them into the chamber. Kerri tries to put up a fight and I have to punch her a few times in the head to daze her. Once she's in, I put Shiloh in. I stroke her beautiful face. "Oh, my little one. Now you and Kerri can be together forever."

I shut the door as she screams, and I turn it on. The fire blazes and their screams fill the air. I hum a soft lullaby as I watch them burn until there's nothing left but ash. Then I take the gurney back to fetch the boy's body and burn that, too. I tidy the room

and put the now spotless machete strap-on back in its box, setting it back into the chest of drawers for its next use.

No one would dare touch any of my toys in my room. No one would come in here.

I go downstairs to the assistant and drop two thousand dollars on the table. “For what I owe and for the bed. The other payment will be deposited as usual.”

“Thank you, ma’am,” she says, taking the money. I don’t wait for her to count it. I go to my car and drive home. After parking in the garage, I retrieve my sleeping clothes and have a shower. I decide to do a load of laundry before I have a sandwich for dinner.

Once done, I have a cup of tea. A pleasant change after a nice day. I’ll have to clear out Shiloh and Kerri’s rooms tomorrow, and destroy any trace that they ever existed. No one will look for them for long.

I finish my tea and set the mug in the dishwasher before I leave the kitchen to brush my teeth and climb into bed. I fall asleep with a smile on my face, knowing the only life that matters still draws breath.

My own.