

Freedom

The floorboards above me creak as a male voice drunkenly drifts over the sound of Matlock on T.V. and echoes down the stairs. “Mmhm, she’s still kickin’.”

I scoot forward in the basement, as far as my chains will reach, and strain to hear his call.

“Got a group coming by tonight. Paid extra to hurt her.”

I absently trace puncture wounds around my dog-collar and finger scars at various stages of healing. Mold, cigar smoke, and my own disgusting odor fills my lungs with every breath I strain to hold in.

“If they break her, they’ll buy her.” He chokes out a guttural laugh that turns into a sputtering coughing fit. His recliner groans and creaks with every phlegmy gasp of air he puffs out.

Rage settles into my gut like a hit of bathsalts. I dart over to my makeshift cot, fold the soiled mattress back, and uncover a jagged pipe shoved between layers of blackened foam. As I slide it free, I rub my thumb across the word I etched onto its side. *Freedom*. My chains dance across the ground as I beat the rotting mattress once, twice, testing out my grip.

Today is the day.

I rush over to a pink, butterfly dresser near the scrap-metal door and stare at identical rows of frilly shorts, shirts, and princess underwear. I grab two of each and wrap *Freedom* in a bundle of clean clothes, using Cinderella’s elastic waist to seal it together.

I cock my head to catch the last fragments of his call.

“I love you, too, Ma. Talk again next month,” he says, then sets the phone in its cradle with a fumbled clang.

His clock-work check-in is over. It’s time.

I call out, “Hey, Larry,” as I untuck a jagged piece of *Freedom*, then cover it with a thin layer of lace.

Nothing.

“Larry,” I call, louder.

Matlock’s theme song blares down the stairs as he turns the volume up.

“Larry!”

The recliner protests as his weight heaves forward and his feet bang to the floor, making dust storms swirl in the dim basement.

“What,” he shouts.

“Larry, please. I need to shower. I reek.” I raise my chin—*as if angling my head would make a difference.*

“So? It’s not like yer goin’ to da prom?”

I try a sweet, seductive voice, “Larry, come on. Don’t you want me to smell good for **our** clients?”

The recliner groans and squeaks as he releases the lever and goes prone overhead.

Fuck. Saying, “our,” was too far. Stupid. Stupid. Stupid. Breathe. I can’t stop now.

I bite my cheek until tears and blood mix into a sob, “Larry, please. I’ll be a good girl, I promise!” *Lies.*

After a long commercial, the T.V. shuts off as he heaves out of his chair and stands. Ten steps later, he’s thundering down the eighteen stairs to reach my dungeon.

I cringe into the darkness and close my eyes, breathing slowly.

He reaches the center of the basement and shoves a male socket into a waiting extension cord. The inside of my eyelids glow as a soft buzz flows through the tangle of wires around my cocoon. Through crisscrossed webs of welded metal, Larry lumbers toward the oval cage he built for me as I grip my weapon tighter in my right hand and exhale deeply.

“Sit on the bed,” he says, unlocking bars across my prison.

My grip tightens on *Freedom*, hidden in the bundle of clothes in my hands, as I step back to my cot.

I lock eyes with Larry, smile slightly and casually ask, “Did Matlock get his guy?”

He swings the door open and steps inside. “Of course. That sumbitch always gets his man.” He bumps the door closed behind him and leers at me, grinning as he hovers chest-level.

“How’s your mom doing? I heard you say goodbye,” I say, edging closer to the door... and him.

“Aw, she’s alright. Got herself a squirrel today.” He points his chin to the cot and says, “Sit down.”

I lower myself onto it as I cup *Freedom* against my stomach like a newborn.

Larry crosses to the bolt holding my chains to the steel wall. “Goodness. You do reek. Why’d you let yourself get like this?”

My mouth drops open and I fight to snap it closed. *Freedom*'s weight feels solid in my hand as I slide my fingertip along the sliver of cold metal and wait.

A moment later, the locks holding me prisoner are unlocked in a series of clicks.

“Well, Laaar,” I drawl out his name, “I did try last week, but you got drunk after the Chief’s game. Remember?” I dig my toe into the compacted dirt floor and hide my expression as his face turns to stone beside me. Chain links scrape across my skin as my choke collar cinches tighter. Spikes puncture my freshly healed neck. Larry drags me to my knees in front of him as I struggle for air.

The room fades from grey to black.

I drop my only weapon to scratch at my collar, yanking the prongs back through their punishing slots.

The bundle clangs into the side of my cot, then clatters across the floor as Larry drops my chain and cocks his head to read my etched handwriting—in a halo of lace and Cinderella.

Freedom.

Recognition dawns on his face and I spring into action.

I shove my feet under me and stand in one fluid motion, knocking him under the chin with the top of my head. He crashes into our cage as he clings to the bars to stop his fall. I debate about stopping to pick up *Freedom*, but the open door is too much to resist.

I leap through the it and make it five feet into the web of scrap metal before my neck is snapped back, slamming me to the floor as crushing injuries run through my mind.

Somewhere else, my legs kick to find purchase as Larry lays on the dirt in the cage and winds the chain around his wrist, shortening my leash, and dragging me closer with every loop.

My frail and weak body is no match for his lumbering, three-hundred-pound frame.

He’s choking the life out of me little by little.

Let me go.

My eyes scan the ground for the metal bar, stopping when I spot it under my cot. I allow Larry to pull me back as I watch *Freedom* get closer with every heave.

I just have to stay conscious.

Stay conscious.

Stay conscious!

He drags me around the corner and back into the cage, dripping with sweat and cursing at me as he coughs out a lung. He drops my chain to grip his heart as his eyes grow in panic.

I slap dirt over and over again as I reach under my cot, grasping for the metal pipe. My hungry fingers wrap around *Freedom* and a victory cry tears out of me.

A hungry gasp of air turns me back Larry. His eyes are shells of black. “Bitch, I saved you. You ain’t goin’ nowheres. You hear?” He stomps my hip as I twist away, trying to unwrap Cinderella from Freedom’s jagged end.

I free it just as he remembers my choke collar and grabs my leash.

Our eyes meet across the chain as I stab him once, twice, a dozen times in the neck before I can make myself stop.

I stare at the blood on my hands and the nearly decapitated Larry, then scurry back across the floor, stumble as I stand, and run from the hell that held me for one-hundred and twenty-two days.