

# FREE AT LAST

*"I am no bird; and no net ensnares me; I am a free human being with an independent will; which I now exert to leave you."*

CHARLOTTE BRONTE

The slender woman stirred on the cot where she slept, then her muscles went flaccid. The darkness in the room hummed a song of internment, enticing her heavily lashed lids to remain sealed. Below, the bluest eyes, unaware of the surrounding shelter, began to move back and forth. Breath slowed to the lowest pace her heart would accept without rebelling. Beads of sweat towered among her brows, giving her eye movement permission to pick up the pace. The tingling, prickling at the crown, spread to the top of her head.

The hairbrush, now in control, tenderly pulled through thick locks. The static-like sensation continued down to her shoulders, across her breasts, spreading down to her thighs. The rhythm was slow and purposeful, like the gentle petting of a lover who knows how to push and pull, and where to dally, to elicit the desired responses. The pungent notes of leather and vanilla warmed her senses. Her pleasure became fuller. The waistlong golden hair clung to the brush, and then released

itself as the stroke found the smooth ends. Strands glistened as they fell free. Cunning hands extended the follow-up strokes upon her head. The petting became more familiar. Awe ceased as the horrifying recognition came to her mind.

*Master? He's here? He's found me. The game has begun.*

Cortisol suddenly replaced the feel-good endorphins, and terror seized her awareness.

*Don't be angry, please don't be angry. Look eager; he wants eager.*

She reflexively turned over to her stomach. Her face found the center of the pillow. She felt gauze-like before his eyes. Her expression shifted, all too late. His sneer prompted her panic. A chill shook her body.

The jury he employed judged her shudder as rejection, and refusal of the master was never acceptable. Consequences were eminent. Knowing hands parted the long hair, and before she could raise a defense, he twisted the hair like a rope around her neck. Holding the hair-noose with one hand, he twisted it tightly, showing no mercy. He laughed maniacally. Forming in her anxious stomach was a pit, a giant's magic seed; it mutated, knotting, thickening as it grew to occupy her throat.

*No air, stay calm. Stay eager. Still no air.*

His other hand covered her nose and mouth, and she sucked in with all her might. He gave in, freeing her face, allowing a breath. Panic urged flight, but she could not move arms or legs; the master had tied her. Straddling the vanity chair, her small breasts sat snug on the top edge of the seatback, she was exposed and vulnerable. He enjoyed her peril. Her shoulders conceded, giving him the answer he wanted.

*Now that you have been reminded of your status you can see that I hold your life in my hands, I will free you, but you will do as I say, enthusiastically. Alright my golden girl, touch yourself the way I taught you.*

Releasing her arms, he returned to stifling her airway. Allowing some air, but controlling quantity, she would be gifted with longer breaths when she impressed him. Spasmodically, her fingers moved, per his expectations. She numbed herself and faked her delight. Anticipating her act, his attention returned to her hair, gripping tighter as he spoke.



*You want this. Sell it to me.*

She did as he ordered, and he loosened his grip to reward her.

*The choosing comes next.*

Her master's eyes glistened with evil intent as he anticipated her choice.

*Would you like me to stop? Decide now.*

Desperate for comfort, her mind ricocheted from thoughts to rebellious feelings.

*Stop, no more, no more. Let go of my hair! No! I won't obey.*

Her body shifted and her face turned away from the pillow. Her muscle tone was returning. Her heartrate normalized, her chest rose and fell. The dream colors muted as the oxygen level improved.

*Wait, this can't be happening. You are only a ghost in my mind. You are not real. You are dead. I killed you. My long hair was left behind along with your hold on me.*

Ariel's hands, now loosed from the dream's bindings, rapidly found her scalp. Her short hair was confirmation; it gave her eyes the courage to open.

*I'm in Caroline's house. I'm alone.*

Squeezing her eyes closed, the dream, lingering ever so slightly in her thoughts, had one last whisper for her.

*Murderer. It is only a matter of time before your deeds catch up to you.*

She shook away the remnants of her sleepy nightmare with a spoken declaration, "No! He's dead."

Fully awake now, Ariel sat upright. Knowing he would never again touch her, made the unknown infinitely more manageable. She continued to calm herself by singing the first song that popped into her head.

"Ding-dong the witch is dead, which old witch, the wicked witch, ding-dong, the wicked witch is dead, wake up sleepyhead, rub your eyes, get out of bed, he is really dead."

Her countenance conveyed the possibility of peace. She did not feel whole, but she felt hope, and that seemed infinitely more important than being 100% stable. Beside her cot, the newspaper lay open. She had circled the contact information in red ink. The recollection

called her away from the nightmares of the past, bringing her into her present reality. She reread the ad.

*Fem Mannequin Models needed for discrete cash paid jobs, no questions asked, no references necessary: Earn up to \$10,000 weekly with A to Z Model Agency. Group interview on Thursday @ 11am. 177 Haley Ave., Reno, NV.*

It had been four days since discovering the ad, and Thursday had finally arrived. Thoughts whirred around in her head as she got out of bed, rolling her sleeping bag and pillow into the familiar bundle systematically. It was her habit to store her things to allow her to grab-and-go quickly.

*Now, what to wear that says this is the right girl for the job, maybe a Hepburn look?*

Besides wondering what to wear for her interview, anxiety triggered by her nightmare, continued to entertain a haunting truth, she was a runaway slave, one who had committed murder, and she might be recognized. She tried pushing it away with reason.

*There were men who searched for me, but like the master who controlled us all, that slave is dead. I am new and alive. I am my own.*

Ariel reminded herself that her current identification was solid. Naturally tanned skin made her photo impeccable. She was nothing like her former image; from what she remembered. In addition to her radically different hair, she had filled out in ways that made her perfectly sculpted beauty more exquisite. She was a stark contrast to her former self, a darker version. Her name, born from ashes of a medicine man's fire, deep in the heart of the Amazon, had been saved, until now.

*I have papers. I am an American with a social security card, and no ties to anything prior. I am prepared to be a "living" Ariel Black, a real person, no disguise. I'm ready to be real...wait...am I?*

A *toxic think*, which would not be sung away, blanketed her anxious spirit.

*I don't know my real name. No one knows the name my parents gave me at birth, no one.*

Her earliest memory, weakened by years of brainwashing and abuse, could only recall having been called, "Little Dove." Hearing

herself speak the name, misplaced her thoughts further.



*But what name did my parents give me? What if my parents had lived? But no, they were killed, and he's dead too. I shot him dead. What if I had not been able to run away? What if I had not been helped or guided by angels?*

Her morning ambition was smothered by a wave of what-ifs. Anxiety had won her back, fleetingly at first, then, unleashed. Lily came to mind before panic took charge.

*Lily? I miss you. I do wish you were here. I'm free, like you said I would be some day. But do I deserve it? You said, we were not to blame for what we did. Oh, Lily, I wish you could be here, I need you.*

Lily was her first true friend, her teacher, and the only one who gave her unconditional love. In secret, Lily called her Little Dove, as proof of their intimate bond. The clandestine act helped them both to hold on to the hope of being “self-owned” someday. The act of disobedience, using a non-slave name, somehow induced a sense of blamelessness for the slaves, and it produced a hope for their future, “where a little dove could be uncaged, and fly free.”

Ariel's present mind reeled in fog-filled memories, then moved toward the dank, insanely prolific jungle, where names and gender were irrelevant. She visualized her past non-binary self, and the jun-gle. They had all rematerialized, she could hear the monkeys and birds, and the natives, whispering to her, “Alma bonita, alma bonita.” Her mental miasma, empowered, took her back, before the jungle; to her first days of *freedom*.

### *Three years prior.*

Waves pushed the bubbling salted foam closer to where she sat on the beach. Fear told her to move back from the water's edge, while curiosity urged her forward; she denied them both. To move at all, meant going toward the unfamiliar; freedom and free people were unknown constructs. She had used every bit of creature nerve to make it this far, she had reached the threshold of a living world. A pinching *what-now* question arose out of the gurgle in her stomach and peaked at the tender place between her sculpted eyebrows.

*What now? What now?*



Her thoughts resounded in rhythm with the nearby waves as they crashed onto the driftwood shore. Her flawless mouth had no answer. Shoes in hand, her alabaster feet met the sand she had imagined for over 20 years. There was no fight in her delicate body, her tangled mane was all she had left to spar with the wind. The *Master's* "Golden Girl," had always understood her place and did what she was told. Now, just hours into an uncaged life, her budding inquisitiveness was wholly disorganized. The action of killing her master had forced the slight bodied being into the immense unknown. No longer a sub-dependent slave, she would have to think and make decisions for herself, and like experiencing the sand and sea for the first time, it was unfathomable, overwhelming, and awe-inspiring all at once.

The sky, like her mind, was fickle. A few lurid clouds passed unnoticed, swiftly moving one direction, and then another; billowing, thinning, and moving on. The cooling yellow ball dipped behind the body of blue-gray water and the tide shifted away, making room for the spindly-legged shorebirds. Unyielding, she stuck to the vastness of the wooded coastal landscape for a sliver of conclusive knowing.

*Where now?*

The waiting made her worry; she pushed the thought away and focused on the distance between herself and the horizon. The sights and sounds were new, but the old familiar clapping, crashing, lapping sounds gave her constant pause. The master's recorded voice was always accompanied by a busy sea. Like a vessel taking on water, the messages seeped in, threatening to flood her being.

*Hope and fear are phantoms arising from thinking of the self. I heard that over and over. I wasn't permitted to be an I, or a me.*

The shore smells made her breathe deeper, her skin noted the temperature, and her ears gathered the remaining evidence. This was air winded by sea, it was not pushed by metal paddles and filtered through narrow earth tunnels. There was no musty scent, and no steady hum.

*He said self is bad. What about him-self? Is it different for women, are we lessor? Our parts are different, and everyone has different skills, even among the slaves. I don't see why parts matter. What if there is*



*no difference between a man and a woman, only differences between humans? Lily? What say you?*

For this fugitive slave, time passed like a litter of pups whelped by a bitch not more than six months herself. Discovery came in spurts; instinct was forced to lead. Eight pups were born and cleaned before her next thought.

*Lily's not here. I am. I am here. There is more of me now, enough to be something bigger. Lily said I was only permitted to be a fraction of my worth as a human. She would say the master keeps for himself, what we should have been given to grow. Lily would say, look upward.*

Her eyes went skyward. The first brilliant stars of the evening twinkled in her eyes.

*That is a real night sky, made not by man. Lily said Mother Nature is the artist of the world, and the sky is a living canvas. Beautifully alive.*

*There you have it, all is not lost.*

The divine had reached her thoughts with a medicinal offering. Recognizing the twinkling wish-lights, she drank them in as life pre-serving elixirs. Then, an endowment from the heavens, the low hang-ing moon whispered to her, "Your peace is within you, rest Little Dove."

The darkness gave way to the sunrise, and a new day began. Shaking the unwanted sand from her shoes and purposing her feet to move, the fugitive trudged away from the overnight sanctuary among the fallen trees on the beach. The salty breeze and the honied sounds of nature encouraged her onward. New sightings were everywhere, tempting excitement. Seagulls squawked, pigeons cooed, squirrels chattered and played, and multitudes of geese clucked by, over her head. The terror had subsided, and instead of questions, she had a grateful knowing.

*I'm alive.*

One day into her uncaged status, with no sign of being pursued, the runaway tentatively drew closer to the living beings around her. Deliberately, like a hunter to prey, she watched, and listened,