

ONE

Darkness. The only certainty Devon had was that she would spend each day in darkness.

Most of the time she was gagged and attached to the metal wall by cuffs and heavy chains at the small of her back. Her only reprieve from those binds came when she was taken to the dank bathroom once or twice a day.

During those times, she wasn't relieved of her gag or blindfold, not that it mattered because the internal room had no light or window. So even when she tried to take off the blindfold, she was greeted by darkness.

Today was Saturday. Her Spanish was pretty good, so she could pick out most of the words her captors exchanged. Those words were few because they weren't often nearby, but when they were, she listened closely. At first she'd been intent on their conversations because she wanted to know where she was and what was going on. After that, there was simply nothing better to do than follow along with what she heard.

The fast Mexican drawl wasn't the only sound. She also heard the voices of terrified women, often American and young, pleading for mercy. Screams of torture and tears of agony gave Devon a clue about her fate.

The small cell she occupied wasn't much more than a four foot square. She couldn't lie down or sit up straight, as the bolt that was welded to the wall where she was chained protruded into her spine. Devon could slouch and stretch her leg to touch the other three walls around her, so she knew she was shut in tight even though she had no visibility. From the close quarters, she had to assume that wherever they were, space was at a premium, meaning her captors endeavored to maximize it by packing their victims in tight.

For hours at a time, all she heard was the clang of metal and the shuffle of bodies. In her first days here, she hadn't tried to call out for help; the other women who arrived at the same time did too much shouting for her to be heard. But when she did gather the courage to question the men who came to her, they beat and gagged her.

When new girls came, they called out but received no reply. The resident girls were either gagged or knew better than to engage in dialogue. Devon listened as other women were beaten and threatened by the men who referred to them as 'cattle' or 'heifers.'

After enduring the onslaught of regular assaults, the women learned to be silent. It didn't help that they weren't fed much, meaning their strength was quickly sapped. Even crying became exhausting when you were surviving on an ounce or two of dirty water and table scraps every few days.

Sometimes a real fighter came along, but those girls didn't last long. Their screams faded into the distance as they were dragged away, never to be heard from again.

Devon didn't know how many women were caged here, it could be five, it could be fifty. Just as she didn't know how many men ran this racket. She wasn't even sure how long she'd been here. The first few days had been a blur of crying, screaming, and beatings, then in her period of despair when she'd come to accept her helplessness, she became so numb that she didn't even bother to open her eyes, let alone register how many days passed.

At night it got cold. She hadn't been given a blanket, so her only protection against the plummeting temperature was the blue dress she'd been wearing when she was snatched. Given the darkness that she existed in, surrounded by the smell of rusted metal, foul sweat, and stale urine, the temperature was the only way she could tell when one sun set or another rose.

In her head, she sang and imagined the vivid landscapes she'd painted. She tried to conjure memories of the long brushes in her fingers and the scrape of pencil lead on weighty paper. Art was her greatest love. She'd made some money with her creations, but had always had to work other jobs to make ends meet.

This existence wasn't living, but there was no escape and no explanations. She had to have hope, to believe she'd get out of this predicament, but she had no idea how it would happen while she was locked in irons and sealed in this metal box. The heat became unbearable at times, and she'd discovered there had to be holes somewhere above her because sometimes she'd feel a welcome breeze, though that could just be a delusion brought on by her seclusion. She often felt she was losing her grip on reality.

Sliding from asleep to awake, she'd stopped feeling the pain of her restraints and expected this day to be like any other. Footsteps came first and she piqued, expecting to be treated to the sound of voices.

Much as she hated these men for what they were doing to her and the other women, hearing them talk, sometimes about current events or the weather, was the only normal human contact she experienced, even if it was by proxy. For those few minutes while she listened to them, she could pretend that she was eavesdropping on a conversation in a coffee shop rather than in her prison.

There were several people in the hallway outside her cell, she could hear them moving around, but they weren't talking. A door was opened, movement followed, and then the cell slammed shut and the noise ebbed away.

Trying to figure out what the men out there were up to was futile; she'd stopped even trying. So when calm returned, she let her eyes close and tried to grab some elusive sleep. But just when she was drifting off, the noise came again, closer this time. Metal rattled, and the scrape of rust intensified the oxidized odor.

A rush of air came as the heavy door to her cell was opened. Two men spoke in Spanish, but their words were so fast that she struggled to compute what they were saying. She was only escorted to the bathroom once or twice a day, and until now it had always been by a single man who took her into the blackened hallway.

This time, a shotgun barrel touched her neck. A heavy male body crouched to muscle her aside, then Devon was being unshackled. Hauled to her feet, the gun moved and she was shoved out of the cell into the corridor where there were half a dozen new voices all commenting on how little time they had or what she looked like. Never had so many men been around when she'd been taken for a quick bathroom visit.

Shoved forward, Devon was forced down the hall into a room at the far end. Not all the voices followed her, only one figure came in behind her to slam the door, sealing them alone inside.

Although she was able to stand, she still couldn't see. Sound had been her greatest ally and worst enemy while she was here. The pant of breath behind her made her edgy, and the rush of water in front of her sounded almost like a shower, but there was no heat.

Her legs struggled when they were given control of her body again after being cramped for such long periods. Their numbness became a painful tingle, and she shifted to try and relieve her discomfort. Their usual bathroom consisted of a toilet and didn't contain so much as a sink. If there was a shower in here, this room was new to her.

"You shower," the voice behind her said, then he whipped off her blindfold.

A blade touched her neck and in time with her gasp, he sliced through the fabric of her dress and underwear, slashing her skin in the process and leaving her nude. Without her blindfold, she could see that there was no light invading this space. These men had to be paranoid about the women escaping or outside observers because Devon had never seen a window.

In the darkness, her modesty came second to the sting on her hip caused by his blade. She had no way to know how deep the cut was, because her hands were still connected to each other at the small of her back. From the intensity of the pain, she feared it went through to the bone, but her defenses were low and her equilibrium shot, so it could easily have been nothing more than a scratch.

The offending knife came around her throat, so close to her skin that a deep breath could have caused him to cut her.

The man behind her was large and smelled of sweat, but when he unlocked her hands from each other, she was grateful to him for a moment. Mobility was bliss, but Devon couldn't fully embrace it, as she was forced forward into the gush of lukewarm water and reality impacted her in a blink.

A bar of slippery soap was thrust into her hand. "You shower," he commanded again.

The space in the shower stall was so small that when she lifted her hands to run them through her hair, her elbows hit the side walls. Devon tried to step out of the stream of water and was prodded in the back with the blade. Tiled walls on three sides hemmed her in, fighting would achieve nothing and there wasn't a better place for him to stab her to death and wash away the evidence if she tested his patience.

He wanted her to shower and she wanted to be clean, for now their wants segued. She lathered the soap and cleaned her body, avoiding the open wound on her hip and the one on her back. The suds still made them sting, but they weren't agonizing, so she took that as a good sign.

"Hurry now," he said, fumbling for her hands to snatch the soap. It clattered to the floor and she tensed in preparation for his wrath at her clumsiness. Except it wasn't clumsiness, she'd been revolted at the feel of his hands on hers and had reacted by trying to get away.

Bracing her hands on the walls, she couldn't see a thing and had no idea what fate these monsters had for her. The heat of the stranger came closer to her naked form, and she held her breath, expecting the worst. Icy liquid seeped onto the top of her head compelling her to gasp.

"Wash your hair," he commanded.

The scent of shampoo began to permeate as the thick goo spread on her crown, so she did as she was told.

Once the last of the shampoo had run away, she was pulled from the spray and pushed face first against a dry wall. Fearful of what this possible ogre could do to her, she swallowed her parched terror and clenched her fists, ready to fight if she had to.

A warm metal cuff closed around her wrist. Once it was secure, he wrenched her arm to her lower back and forced the other down to be locked in a second thick cuff. The knife he'd used to keep her obedient wasn't in his hand anymore and the shotgun was gone too. His size made it unlikely she'd triumph in a fight, so if she wanted to win, she'd need the weapon.

Using the dark to do more than disorient her, he'd ensured she couldn't seize a weapon she couldn't see. With all his pulling and shoving, her sense of direction was lost, too, so despite her assumption that this room was small, she still wouldn't be able to find the exit.

She had tried pleading with her captors before and it had never worked, but she wasn't ready to surrender yet. "Why are you doing this? Please let me go," she said.

The man backed away, and she stalled her breathing, hoping beyond expectation that he might listen or that maybe this shower had been a prelude to release all along.

"I'm not allowed to mark your body today, but if you do not sell tonight, my boss will let us have you." The tone of menace in his unmoved voice made her already frigid body chill.

Sell? Sell what? If the alternative was being handed over to this oaf and his buddies, then she'd sell sand in the desert. There was no time for her to try and figure out what he meant. Something dug into her hair and pulled down, and it took her a second to realize that he was combing her wet hair.

When it stuck in her locks he cursed but carried on until it was combed, ignoring her yelps of pain when the comb snagged. After it left her hair for the last time, she stayed pressed to the wall, listening to the deep pants coming from her assailant.

Devon wanted to ask what was going to happen to her. But she was terrified that he might give her an honest answer and she wasn't prepared for what he might say.

Having endured so much sensory deprivation, her sight was useless, but her hearing was heightened. His breathing became so magnified that the burn of tears she'd thought were long dried up streaked her face again.

"Please let me go," she whimpered, resting her forehead on the wall, but he said nothing. "Déjame ir, por favor."

Her energy was gone and her legs gave out, sending her to the floor. There was nothing left to fight for. It was hopeless. At first her cell was a prison, but now it was a sanctuary for her. Out here was unknown, in her cell she listened, tried to sleep, and had her hands released during the times they served the slop they gave her for food. Here in this hell, that was the happiest her life could be.

Women were treated as animals, beaten for misbehaving, and when they left, they never came back. Since she'd been here, they'd hosed her down in her cell twice, but they'd never given her a shower or let her shampoo her hair. Much as she wanted to believe her luck was turning, she was too realistic to think this situation could ever culminate in a positive experience.

Grabbing hold of her arm, he pulled her up, and raised a knee to drive it against her spine. When he covered her eyes again, he didn't use the standard dirty rag blindfold. The fabric was softer, and it had

a band of elastic that went over her ears to hold it around her head. Lace scratched her cheeks and she figured it out, it was a sleep mask.

The cuffs weren't the same restraints she'd worn before the shower either. The new ones were looser and gave her more latitude to separate her hands because there was a foot of chain between them. Devon still couldn't get out of the shackles, but the changes were noteworthy because to her they meant one thing: she wasn't going back into that cell.

While she figured all of this out, something was put around her neck. Warm and smooth, she smelled leather and heard him fasten a buckle that constricted her throat as it tightened. Devon had worn her share of chokers, but she had never worn a collar.

Her neck was pulled forward and the door opened. The collar had to have a leash because she was tugged forward again, but no one was touching her. Stumbling along the corridor, she had no idea where they were going, except this walk was longer than any she'd had since she'd been here.

Voices returned and were joined by some jeering wolf whistles. They stopped and her heart was beating so hard that she could feel each pulse in her ears. Metal scraped and squeaked, a door maybe, then they were walking again.

Through the sleep mask, she could see glimmers of light but couldn't pick out figures to go with the speakers who seemed to be moving with them. Becoming aware that she was still naked and now in a place with illumination, the crowds of voices belonged to men who could see every inch of her.

Being tugged and yanked was making the back of her neck hurt, but not as much as the flesh at the edge of the collar that was cutting in and chaffing every time he pulled it.

Another door was opened and the voices around her came to an abrupt silence. Susurrations in the new space piqued her interest until she was yanked forth into the familiar atmosphere of an air-conditioned room. All this time she'd been close to home comforts and they'd been denied to her. Maybe this was where the cool air she'd felt in her cell had come from.

Until they were taken away, she hadn't realized how she relished life's little luxuries. If she got out of here, she vowed to never take what she had for granted again.

She was led out about eight feet and halted when the tugging stopped. At the same time, the murmurs that emanated from one direction, ceased.

"Here we have the final lot of the night, our most premium specimen. An unblemished brunette, a petite model, delicate at five foot four and now less than a hundred pounds. She is an English-speaking American. I'll remind all participants that bids are in United States dollars. She comes with new ID papers and a corresponding passport. I'll start the bidding at ten thousand dollars."

Bids. The masculine voice who had declared the terms was a native English speaker, a confident one without compunction. The bidders had to be using paddles or something because they were silent, but the auctioneer was talking faster and faster as the bids grew.

Like cattle, she was being sold. Everything slotted into place and panic seized her. Reeling from this development, and on instinct, she pulled away from the leash and because her captor wasn't expecting her resistance, she got away from him. The blindfold was restricting and with her hands cuffed behind her back, she wouldn't be able to pull it.

Still, launching herself forward, she ran until she hit a wall. Using her body, Devon tried to find a doorway, but she'd struggle to open it with her hands where they were. Something burned her waist and she screamed, but her body spasmed and hit the floor, then everything went black.

