

ONE

Rain...Torrents of it falling from a dark, almost black sky and progressively washing mud and blood from the once, pretty face of a young girl whose lifeless body lay in one of the many muddy puddles that had been formed by the downpour. A rivulet of blood ran from a wound just above the hairline of her soaked black tresses only to be washed from her face by the constant deluge that cleansed her skin and revealed the bruises on her cheeks and swelling on her split lips.

She lay on her back with her long black hair spread out around her head like a halo. Her arms were by her side and the bruises on her thighs and ankles, gave testament to the force her assailants had used to restrain her and nullify any attempt to resist their malevolent inclinations. Remnants of cotton material which were all that was left of a yellow dress she had once proudly worn, covered very little of her near naked body as the soaked cloth clung to her skin.

Farther away, rainwater dripping from the branches and leaves of the many trees that failed to shelter the girl from the torrential downpour, splattered onto a spreading branch around ten feet from the ground and ran down a rope, from which, suspended by his neck, was a man with booted feet swinging free just above the ground. His arms were tied behind his back and his head lolled on one side with bulging eyes evidencing the way the rope had tightened around his neck effectively, choking the life out of him as he struggled and fought to breathe.

A soft moan escaped the lips of the girl lying on the ground and she moved an arm slightly before moaning again from the effort. Then her eyelids fluttered slightly before opening to reveal big brown eyes. She stared for a moment at the canopy of branches and leaves attached to the many trees that towered above her. But because of the water that ran into her eyes, she was forced to quickly, turn her head away. A violent shudder passed through her body as she lay with her head turned to the side and her small form immobile. She tried to familiarise herself with her surroundings and make sense of why she was lying on the muddy, rain soaked ground. But her young mind was in an almost stupefied state and she found herself unable to discern, through the numbness in her mind, what had happened to her.

She felt she should make an attempt to move away from the mud and the rain, but possessed neither the will nor the inclination to do so. Subsequently, she lay

and shivered in the rain as her befuddled mind fought to bring some awareness of her situation to the fore.

Gradually however, she became cognizant of her plight and her mind was suddenly filled with the terrifying and harrowing memory and the reason she found herself in her present position. A memory so vivid she wished she could blank it out again and return to her previous state of unconsciousness or even death and she suddenly began to cry. She simply lay in the muddy puddles with her head turned to the side and softly wept out her despair for a very long time.

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Out of the mists of the rain emerged a horse and rider, picking their way between the many trees. The rider was a woman dressed in a buckskin tunic and pants, with moccasins on her feet. She wore nothing to protect her clothing from the rain and the tight fitting and soaked, buckskins clung to her body like a second skin accentuating her curves and long legs. The animal she rode, was a mule even though it was the size and had the muscular body of a big thoroughbred horse. However, its head was undeniably, that of a mule. It was an animal that had been bred for racing and one that had so much durability, it was capable of running at a steady pace over great distances with little food or water, for hours.

The woman halted her mount near the forlorn girl lying on the ground and gazed down at her pitiable, near naked body. The evidence of any emotion she may have displayed was difficult to see, as rain, or tears, or possibly both, ran down her expressionless face. It was only when she noticed the girl's shoulders shaking as she sobbed silently into the rain soaked ground, that she quickly exploded into action. She vaulted from the back of the mule, landing lightly, on her moccasin covered feet before crouching beside the wretched child. She touched the girl's shoulder causing her to scream and curl up on her side, trembling and sobbing uncontrollably.

'Maya,' she said gently. 'It's me Ruth. You are safe now Maya.'

Maya turned her tear and rain soaked face to look up at the woman and recognition materialised in her frightened eyes.

'Ruth,' she whispered. 'Oh Ruth.'

The woman pulled the frightened girl into her arms and cradled her small body as Maya pressed her face to Ruth's bosom and wept silent tears. They stayed that way for a long time as the incessant rain poured down from the heavens and continued to soak everything around including the silent forms huddled together beneath the trees.

Eventually, Maya's tears dried up and she lay still, knowing there was nowhere safer for her than Ruth's arms. The very presence of the woman gave her a greater sense of security than any man or any other woman would be capable of doing. At last, she knew she was safe. To her mind, the woman in whose arms she lay, was invincible and a goddess who would never allow any further harm to befall her.

Ruth easily, lifted the girl and stood tall with the child cradled in her arms before carrying her to the comparative shelter of a tree with a particularly dense canopy. She gently, sat Maya close to the trunk of the tree where the ground wasn't so wet but the girl clung on to her and would not release her arms from around Ruth's neck.

'Don't leave me Ruth,' she whispered fearfully.

'I'm going to get a blanket from the mule, you can watch me,'

Maya released her arms and watched attentively, as Ruth walked away toward the mule that was standing perfectly still a few yards away. She brought the mule close and released from behind the saddle, a blanket that had been rolled up inside a slicker. She cocooned the girl in the blanket and then covered her with the slicker to keep the blanket relatively, dry before examining the wound on her head. Satisfied that it wasn't too serious, she fixed the girl's eyes with her own and asked the question.

'Do you feel up to telling me what happened Maya?'

The girl, as in many occasions, was unable to tear her eyes away from Ruth's gaze. Ruth's intense blue eyes held her own deep brown ones in a hypnotic bond that only the woman had the power to break. However, Ruth's hold on her didn't stop the tears from flowing once more as the girl was forced to relive the horrors of her ordeal.

'They attacked me and forced me to do what they wanted,' she wailed. 'I couldn't fight them Ruth, I tried but they were too strong for me.'

Ruth pulled the girl into another embrace before speaking in her ear.

'Why wasn't William here to protect you? Why did he leave you alone? It isn't like him to do that.'

As though Ruth's words had triggered a memory the girl was trying to conceal, Maya began wailing anew but with much more intensity.

'Oh Ruth,' she cried. 'I'm so sorry.'

The woman responded with a tremor in her voice.

'What is it Maya? What's happened to William? Tell me.'

Maya ceased her crying and stared at Ruth with a horrified look on her face.

‘I think they killed him,’ she said hoarsely.

‘You think they killed him?’

‘They surprised us and overpowered William before he had a chance to fight them. Then three of them dragged him away through the trees while one of them held me back. Then I heard a shot and before long the three men came back alone and turned their attention to me.’

Maya blurted out her tale quickly before she could dwell on the details that would surely cause her to start sobbing again.

Ruth was suddenly, on her feet and glaring down at the sorrowful girl.

‘Where did they take him Maya?’ She yelled. ‘Which direction?’

Maya began to cry again as she realised the anguish Ruth would be experiencing from her revelation.

‘They took him into the trees,’ she sobbed. ‘Close to where you found me.’

Ruth was gone in an instant leaving the frightened girl feeling very alone and terrified that the men who had so brutally abused her, would return while she didn’t have her friend to protect her.

Ruth moved quickly, but incredibly silently, between the trees close to where she had found Maya. There had been no let-up in the rain since she’d found Maya and if anything, the torrent was even heavier if that were possible. So she didn’t at first, see the hanging man as she approached the tree from which he had been suspended. The downpour was so heavy, that she only made out shapes of trees and bushes through the streaks of rain that fell from the heavens. When she did finally come upon him, she thought at first, the weather was playing tricks with her eyes and even when she was able to recognize what it was and though, given the evidence that William had been forced to come into the woods by three men, she still denied to herself that the body hanging from a branch was her man.

She forced herself to approach but was unable at first, to look up into his face, even though she had already recognized the clothing and the form of the man she had grown to know so well. She simply stood before him with head bowed knowing there was nothing she could do for him now and concentrated on wrestling with the control of her emotions. She determined that her strength of character would not desert her now and forced herself to keep the tears from surfacing and to stay strong.

After standing perfectly still for a very long time before her man while the rain continued to beat down onto her lonely form, she finally, raised her head to gaze into his bloated face and an involuntary sob escaped her lips as she saw how the once, handsome face she had learned to love, had changed into a mask of horror.

She vowed, the single sob she had been unable to hold back and the few tears that mingled with the rain running down her cheeks were the only emotions she would allow herself until she had found the men who had committed the atrocities against Maya and William.

Ruth unsheathed her big hunting knife and cut the rope that had been tied to the tree before lowering the body to the ground. Then she used the knife to carve out a grave in the soft ground. After two hours of digging with just her knife and scooping out the earth with her bare hands, she finally had a grave deep enough to bury William. She had worked none stop for a full two hours, welcoming the punishing task as a distraction from her grief. However, she was unable to prevent the memories of the short time she had spent with William, from materialising at the forefront of her mind. The adventures and also the love they had shared brought back bitter sweet memories. She recalled the occasion when William had cared for her when she herself was close to death. She was certain, without William's aid, she would surely have died and the remorse she felt, that she hadn't been around to repay his dedication, bit deep into her soul and broke her heart. It was possible; though she never realised it; her already fragile mind had also become broken. Because her future behaviour, though never rational, became erratic and unfathomable. All that however, came later. At that particular time she remained outwardly calm, though her inner being was by contrast, in absolute turmoil as she laid her man in the shallow grave his face covered by his leather vest and began to scoop the soil back into the pit until he was covered and a small mound was all that was left to show where he lay.

By then, the rain had stopped although the sky remained overcast and dark and as evening rapidly approached it simply added to the gloom and sombre atmosphere around the place. Ruth searched around for rocks and stones to lay on the grave in the assumption they would keep animals from digging it up. It was the least she could do for William having been away in his hour of need. That particular task took a very long time for she needed to search far and wide for suitable boulders and rocks and then carry them one at a time, from as far away as two or three hundred yards. By the time she was satisfied that the grave was secure from marauding animals, it was dark and she was totally exhausted.