

Run Till You Can't

The sudden jolt of tension her pant leg created while catching on the tall, and deceptively sharp, cypress knee made her gait falter and nearly caused her to fall. She quickly freed the fabric and resumed her pace.

Her legs were pumping furiously in an attempt to push her faster. It seemed as though the labored sound of each of her strained breaths was propelling each stroke of the leg as it rose and fell in its haphazard cadence.

She used the sleeve of her torn and muddy sweatshirt to push the dirt and tears from her eyes. Each side of her face was crusted with streaks where she had performed this same action repeatedly before.

The woods she was running through were alive with sound; sounds of grasshoppers, toads, frogs, and a menagerie of other animals. Even the heavy cypress trees creaked and groaned with the pressure of the passing wind. The wind was the precursor to the large storm coming in from the Gulf. A storm not unusual for this area of Florida, but strong and worthy of attention, none the less. Over this symphony of sound, her run through the brush could plainly be heard, as it was really the only one out of place.

She came to another stop, but this one on her own accord. Looking around with a frantic turn of her head, she gasped in large gulps of air, attempting to regain some of her missing strength and slow down her heart rate. In the midst of her panting, she could not recall a time she had run as fast and hard as this. This was taking all the strength in her reserves.

The sound of metal scraping against metal, slow and deliberate, twisted between the gnarled trees belying its distance from the origin. Without hesitating to look for the source of the noise, she began to run again.

The tears she had attempted to stifle crept their way again down her ruddy cheeks. She paused for more air, put her hands on her knees, and kept saying "Anthony. Why, Anthony? Why did you have to bring me here and leave me?" With ragged breaths, she closed her eyes and let the tears fall.

The tell-tale 'shush' of metal scraping metal came to her again. With a small whimper, she took to her escape again.

As she ran, the events of the past hour started to take hold of her mind. They were gone for a time because she needed them to be. She needed to not think of what had happened to Anthony.

Her beloved Anthony. She fell for him because in his soul, he was

compassionate and kind. Always willing to help anyone who asked and volunteering for those who didn't. He was only trying to help this time, too. Only trying to help.

The number of cypress trees were becoming fewer in this area of the state park. They weren't offering as much protection from her pursuer as she needed. Soon enough he was going to be there. Soon he was going to do what he said he would do. Worse than what he did to Anthony. He promised he was going to do worse.

Anthony, why did you? Why did you have to be so kind to him? She thought as her legs nearly gave way beneath her.

She was trying with all her might to push back the flood of memories of her Anthony. She knew if more memories came, she would crumble. She would crumble and fall. That would be the end.

In a breath the woods abruptly stopped. She was running through a clearing. Not a true clearing, more the solid edge of a marsh.

The tears and sobs started coming strong now. She knew that this was as far as she was going to be able to go. Already her feet were sinking in the spongy dirt. Ahead she could see a break in the tall grass and knew that's where the bank of the slow river was going to be.

Along with the alligators and other assorted inhospitable creatures.

Not knowing if she should attempt to cross the river, or turn to the side and follow it, her indecision kept her running forward, tears falling all the while.

She slowed down enough as she approached the edge to see that jumping into the river would be futile. The three large alligators on the opposite bank made the decision for her.

Turning to follow the edge of the river allowed her to see the expanse of marsh before her. Somehow the grass wasn't as tall in this direction, affording her a look at the area ahead.

The sight caused her knees to consider betraying her and buckle. Just fifty yards away from her, the river cut wide. Too wide. It seemed to spill itself into a larger body of water. The land she was traversing, which was becoming even softer, was in fact a peninsula. Soon enough, she would need to double back to continue her escape.

Needing the possibility of survival, she yelled with all the strength her haggard breathing would allow, "Help!". She yelled it so loud and powerfully, it felt as if her her vocal chords stretched and blood vessels would burst in her

larynx.

However, the wind that was coming with the advancing storm, took her furtive and pleading call for help into itself, and dissolved it before it could make it to the trees beyond the far side of the water. The sound didn't even echo as the wind picked up.

This is the end, she thought. The end.

Slowing to a jog, she continued to the edge of the tall grass and stopped at the edge of the bank. An adolescent alligator was eyeing her, completely still, in the water just a few yards away. He didn't twitch or move, but floated with effortless ease, his small eyes locked on her.

She didn't bother to hold back the tears now. She let them flow freely. Her sobs came next, with her shoulders bobbing in time. Her exhaustion and need for deep breaths didn't sway the sobs from coming stronger.

Lowering herself to her knees, she waited. She watched the alligator float in the water, the wind blow through the grass and the sun dapple through the dark and expectant rain clouds.

She waited for him to come.

It wasn't long until she heard the sound of the metal on metal coming closer. When he was a few yards behind her, she could hear that he wasn't even out of breath. As if he hadn't exerted himself at all in this chase. His 'game' he called it.

"Why?" she asked, not turning around. "Why do this? We were only trying to be kind."

The man chuckled slightly. "Darlin'," he responded. "You don't need to be kind around here. You need to be strong."

"Strong?" she asked through tears and ratcheted sobs. "How can anyone be strong enough? You hold all the cards. You control all the ways out of here." She hung her head low and said softly, "No one can be that strong."

Again, a small chuckle. "Well, yeah, I suppose that's true. It's why I said you should run till you can't."

She tried to listen to the sound of the wind. Anything but the metallic noise. The wind wasn't loud enough, though. She still heard the metal sound as it was brought down towards her with a grunt of effort.

The young alligator watched the scene from its floating vantage point. It watched the man pick up her still form. It continued watching in silence as the man turned back into the tall grass.

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