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Upside Down

by Penny Humphrey

I broke into a cold sweat. I turned very slowly, my hands high in the air and began to walk away. Every painful step I knew could be my last.

It began on a grey December morning. I was out looking for holly in the copse with my dog Jack. I found a bush with berries almost out of my reach. Jack was chasing squirrel scents amongst the dead leaves while I climbed onto the stone wall to reach the berries.

As I reached into the bush I heard men's voices across the field, sharp voices, accusatory. I stopped what I was doing and peered ahead of me. At the bottom of the sloping field outside a decaying barn, two men were bent to some sort of task, although I could not tell what they were doing from where I stood. They were having a loud argument and gesticulating. And then the unmistakable loud sharp crack of gun fire burst the air. One man dropped to the ground.

The small world around me froze momentarily, Jack stopped in his tracks then fled for home.

By the time I regained my senses enough to get off that wall I saw the man with the gun looking in my direction and breaking into a run towards me. I leapt down landing awkwardly and heard my ankle snap. The searing pain made running almost impossible but the man was gaining ground up the hill and fear forced me on.

As I stumbled over the uneven ground, I remembered seeing two men in the pub a couple of days before. They were strangers to these parts and were having an animated discussion. It was the fact that they were talking almost in loud whispers that caught my attention. They obviously didn't want anyone to hear their business but it sounded acute. Undoubtedly they were the two men I had just seen.

I kept running as well as I could but could hear the man gaining on me with every step and now he was shouting for me to stop. If I could just get out of that copse and could yell loudly enough I might get the attention of someone but it was too late the man came up behind me and hurled me to the ground. As I turned he was standing over me, angry but glancing anxiously around him.

He ordered me to get up and make my way back down to the barn. My ankle was like a balloon and so agonising I thought I might faint. We made slow progress and he kept pushing at me with the nozzle of the gun to move quicker.

I knew I wouldn't make it all the way to the barn and even if I did I knew what the outcome would be, so I turned, hands in the air and started the painful walk towards my home not knowing if panic would cause him to pull that trigger even in an open space,