

TIGER RUN

Chapter 1.

Offshore a shimmering lake of silver light spread across a calm sea, reflecting the newly risen moon. Light danced and dazzled as it scattered in the gentle waves lapping on the beach. Old concrete tank traps formed sinister figures on the flotsam strewn sand and moon shadows stretched to oblivion in the flat grey fields inshore.

Two dark figures on the low cliff were silhouetted against the cool light to any observers from Fraisthorpe village. Their broken brown and black stripes only suggested at the extreme outer curves of their bodies, blending to uniform black further from illumination. Sinister ghosts, until they spoke.

"Scared?" asked Jan, in an excited whisper. She was breathing quickly, almost breathless, even though as yet there had been no exertion. Her body was merely anticipating, fight or flight response fully primed. This would be an adventure and she was fully prepared mentally.

"Terrified!" breathed Luke, almost inaudibly. He was shivering, probably the effects of fear drugs as well as the slight chill he felt. He was much larger than Jan but his extra body mass didn't seem to be protecting him from the cold, his size did make him feel very visible. He was not in any way prepared for this mentally.

"Are you cold?" he whispered, surprised that he couldn't control the shaking. It wasn't that cold and his life wasn't in imminent danger. His responses didn't know how to prepare for social suicide.

"Skins a bit chilly after the warm car, but not really cold. I still can't believe I'm doing this," she hissed, sniggering excitedly. She saw no real danger, just possible humiliation, which perhaps wasn't quite as Earth shattering to her as to Luke.

"Neither can I," stated Luke, almost in shock. His mind had detached itself from his actions, his higher brain completely unable to influence the demon currently in control. "I feel unbelievably naked, and stupid. It was all somehow a game till now, something that you talked and joked about but never actually did."

"You did it now!" she giggled, almost letting her voice raise. "And you are naked."

"I didn't just mean that way, vulnerable might be a better word. Vulnerable and scared."

He was a lot more than scared. If this went wrong his life wouldn't be worth living, and he'd deserve everything he got. This whole thing was completely insane.

"Excited as well by the looks," she said, glancing at his manhood proudly pointing the way.

"Yes," he smiled, glancing at it himself. He'd actually nearly had some kind of orgasm when Ian took their clothes and left them there, was still close. His mind was half numb with disbelief that he'd actually done this. He felt so close to panic that he had to do something, but screaming was out of the question. Crying wouldn't undo what he'd done. And just to top things off the girl now thought him likely to jump on her.

"I suppose we'd better start, before I break down and start crying. There's no turning back now," he said regretfully. They were all alone, Ian was by now miles away on his way back, laughing his head off. He'd never be able to look him in the face again. Panic began to well up as he began to imagine what everyone would think of him. He had to move and get his mind off such things, because it was too late to do anything about them.

"Think you should go with that thing sticking out, can't you turn it off or something?"

That broke his thoughts and made him smile. "Wish I could, and I never thought I'd hear myself say that. Don't worry though, attractive though your female attributes are they have nothing to do with it. It's just the excitement, danger and rising panic. It's only just hitting home what I've got myself into."

"Just the same I think you should go in front."

He just snorted, she was in no danger whatever sexually. Fear tended to enhance sex but he was beyond enhancing fear and approaching terror. In his current state he'd no doubt that his present embarrassment would fail turning to complete humiliation should he be offered sex. His friends would think him weird for not trying it on, he'd never live it down. He strode out into the field resigned to the fact that he'd have to move to another town, maybe even change his name when this was over.

It was only a short distance from the beach to where they would join the farm road, about two hundred yards, but it was directly through a planted field and each step hurt his feet. He felt every stone dig in like a knife, and each time his foot landed his knee nearly gave way. Even so he set a fast pace, time was very limited. It would be dawn around four o'clock and the pain from ripped feet was far preferable to being caught in the open in daylight. Crowds of holiday makers gawping at them as the police dragged them away, maybe even TV news cameras. 'Panic thoughts again, move faster'.

"I don't think we should run yet with our stomachs as full as they are, but a fast walk would be useful," he said a little reprovingly to encourage Jan who seemed to be resisting the pace. "We should try to get as far as possible tonight. We won't be quite as strong later on because of lack of food."

His inclination was to start sprinting and not stop till he dropped. Thinking ahead he hoped would distract him, keep him calm. He was the male, and the oldest, most responsible. He almost broke out laughing at that thought, and quickly found himself chanting in his head, 'This is not happening, this is not happening.' Unfortunately that didn't tally with reality.

Body paint was all the protection they had, the pattern chosen because it seemed to serve tigers well. Neither of them had any faith in it, and both felt as if they were walking with a spotlight following. A very bright moon didn't help concealment, but it did help against the much bigger danger of injury, although at the moment that didn't seem like the big danger.

"Unless we find food on the way," replied Jan hopefully, more thinking aloud than speaking to Luke. "Too early for apples or berries but there should be something edible... Shit what's that!" She grabbed Luke's arm and almost pulled him down. "What?" he whispered, suddenly shaking all over, his stomach churning, heart pounding so hard he could hear it as well as feel it.

"That over there, near the edge of the field," she hissed urgently.

"It's a bush!" he said loudly, trying to slow his heart and shaking. "Damn, don't do that! You nearly gave me a heart attack."

"It looks like a man to me," she said uncertainly.

"A man! It's six feet high and twelve feet wide. There aren't many men that shape. Come on Jan. If you jump at every bush we'll never get there."

"If I don't and it turns out to be someone we won't get there either, and it'll be a lot more embarrassing."

Luke actually blushed, and was glad the light wasn't good enough to show it.

"Don't remind me. I've had nightmares all week about getting caught. Being arrested would be bad enough but explaining to family and friends what I was doing running about the countryside naked and painted up like a tiger would be impossible."

"Getting arrested is all that worries me, I'm not really worried about afterwards. Although what they'd charge us with I'm not sure."

"Insanity would probably be a good guess."

"That's not a crime, but what you're thinking probably is," she said, glancing again at his erection.

"Yes, murder if go on about that any more."

"If you're not thinking about sex it shouldn't do that!"

"Don't be stupid. Most men who are executed die with one, but they aren't thinking about sex!"

"You aren't being executed!"

"This is worse!" he snarled, setting off again. His legs were weak from the adrenaline pounding, almost making him stumble, making walking even more difficult.

They didn't speak again as they continued across the field. They kept to areas flattened by tractor tyres to save their feet as much as possible but every step still hurt until they reached the small road. This road was tarmac and a little gentler, no loose stones. It was the only road to the beach, but it bent and twisted a lot and ended at the farm so they'd left the car at the farm and walked some distance away before removing their clothes. Cutting straight across the field meant they avoided going near the farm and shortened the distance. At that time of night they didn't expect any movement on the road but the less time they spent on it the better.

The road ended in a 't' junction in the middle of the village only a mile or so from the beach. Many of the fields here had wire fences so they decided to risk going through the houses. It would have been very difficult and perhaps dangerous to try to go round.

As they moved carefully along the road towards the houses fences sprang up at both sides, meaning they had no way to get off the road to hide if something should come.

"I don't like this!" remarked Luke feeling very nervous. "I think we should try to run, but carefully. My feet don't like this surface much but I don't think running will do any more damage than that field did."

"My feet are already getting tender. It wouldn't take much to make them very sore, and you know what that means." moaned Jan, seeing no reason to run.

"I know, I tried to harden mine but they feel tender as hell just now. I expect they'll harden as time goes on. We'll have to risk a run, the longer we're trapped on this road the more chance of someone coming."

"All right, go, but take it steady."

They began a fast trot, and came to the houses and junction in a few minutes. So far there was no sign of life. There were a few lights on in the houses but the dark street was quiet. Keeping low they kept up the pace along the street out towards the A165 road.

"We've done it, run through a town naked," hissed Jan, smiling.

Luke was also smiling, as much with relief as anything. There were only about half a dozen houses on the single street but the fact they'd passed close to people without being seen gave him just a little confidence, illogical though it was.

The little street ran almost parallel to the main road and joined it a hundred yards or so from the junction with the access road. There was traffic on that road, but not heavy at this time of night. It still represented a formidable obstacle.

"We're getting near the road, better keep quiet for a while. Those in the cars can't see us but somebody walking would hear us, and we're still in the houses."

"It's nearly three miles to Brid, who'd be walking out here at this time, and the house up this end is all blacked out."

The village had been the first trial, and now they were more or less through and well on their way she felt confident, exhilarated.

Unfortunately her question was answered almost instantly as they heard laughter very close by. They crouched on the verge of the small road, a hedge separating them from the main road, hearts pounding, almost afraid to breathe, but finding it almost impossible not to pant loudly.

Luke's first impulse was incredible embarrassment, whoever it was had seen them and was laughing at them. But the laughter was only light, not the hysterics he would have expected. It quieted down after a minute and two voices continued taking quietly as they moved down the road. A couple obviously walking back to their camp site after a night out.

"That was close!" breathed Jan in his ear. "I thought they'd seen us for a minute."

"I don't think my heart can take a lot of this," panted Luke, rolling onto his back. "We've only gone a few hundred yards and I've aged a few hundred years."

"So it seems. I notice that didn't turn you on," she observed. Luke just snorted.

"It did me. Mine would be stuck out a mile if I had one."

He burst out laughing, even though he was still shaking. "How in hell did I ever get into this. I must be completely out of my mind."

"What have you ever done or are likely to do that's anywhere near as exciting as this. How many others would dare to do it. This run makes us special, and we're going for full tiger. There's only a handful in the whole country."

"I can easily understand why." What he couldn't understand was what he was doing here. This had all been fun to plan and talk about, but then he'd spoiled it by actually doing it.

"Come on lets get across the road before anyone else strolls along. I wish it were a bit darker, we're really going to stand out in those fields at the other side."

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"I doubt it," said Jan, feeling quite at ease. "And if we were seen from a distance they wouldn't know we had nothing on, probably just think it was animals or something."

"Yes of course. People often see six foot animals walking around the fields at night. Wouldn't even give us a second thought."

"I'm not six feet, and anyone out in those fields who might see us will probably be more concerned about us seeing them," replied Jan.

"Comforting thought. Only us two, naked, and a load of criminals sneaking around the countryside."

"Let's hope it turns you on if we meet any. You can point it at them and they'll either run or die laughing."

Luke hadn't known Jan very well before tonight, she was one of Ian's friends, as was he. When this idea had come up he'd gone along mainly to get more acquainted with her, eventually get her into his bed. He found himself looking at her a little differently now, a little more respectful. Her lack of fear and wit buoyed up his spirits, made him think that perhaps he was taking it all too seriously. He wouldn't have to change his name when this was over, so long as he moved far enough away. Australia might be nice.

As they moved round the hedge onto the road Jan stumbled and almost fell.

"Ouch! My feet!" she said loudly, still stumbling, trying to lift both feet at once. The small loose stones at the side of the road were digging into her feet. Luke had stumbled right through them to the hard surface, his mind distracted.

"Come on out of the hedge!" he hissed loudly, glancing down the road where the couple were, although they could not be seen or heard. "You're making enough noise to wake them in Brid."

"That hurt!" she said limping over to him.

"It hurt me as well, just scream quietly like I did next time. Come on, hurry, we've got to get off the road. Through the hedge here, tread carefully at the side."

Soft grass both sides of the broken rails they went through gave instant cool relief to their feet. This part of the hedge had been poorly repaired after some damage or other, probably a car hitting it. Once through the hedge they found themselves in a corn field. The corn was still immature and reasonably soft, as was the ground between the stalks because it was still damp from the previous days shower. Following crop edges and paths was the general plan, to save their feet as much as the crops, but this first field had to be crossed. Any thoughts about crop damage were quickly dispelled. Naked people with bare feet tread very carefully, it's too painful to do damage.

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The rain the previous day had been a consideration for the timing of the run. At least three days clear was now forecast, so the ground would be soft for a while but otherwise they'd be dry.

"Can you see the thicket?" asked Jan scanning the open field. "I can see the farm house but not the trees."

The thicket was a small wood, their first landmark to guide them across this first large field. Because of various buildings they needed to navigate accurately to miss them all and still hit the road they needed.

"I think I can see it, it's quite a way off. We'll just head out to the right of the farm."

Luke strode out as quickly as care allowed. This time Jan moved in front. Movement seemed easier for her, perhaps lower weight making her feet sink less, encountering fewer stones. She also seemed much less cautious, more at ease than Luke. He found this disturbing, because he was down right scared of getting caught and she didn't seem to be. What happened next seemed like poetic justice to Luke. Jan just disappeared. A splash and faint moan the only sounds to give clues as to why.

"This is not the time to play in streams!" he stated from the overgrown bank of the small stream she'd fallen in. The immature corn was the same height as the grass growing along the stream, and in the moonlight they blended together. Jan had merely stepped into space, hadn't seen the ditch and stream.

A large lump of mud splattered on Luke's chest, making him stagger back a little as he laughed.

"Don't stand there like a fool, help me out, I'm up to my waist in mud."

Luke helped pull her out, then suggested she wash off some of the mud before moving on. He was almost in hysterics at the slime slowly sliding down her legs. "I'm not washing in that. I polluted it with the shock of falling in. But don't worry, I threw the dirt out."

Luke's laughter died instantly. "Shit!" he shouted, frantically scrubbing the mud off his chest then wildly shaking it off his hands.

"Quiet!" hissed Jan. "I'm only joking. The farms just there."

"Don't make jokes like that!" he snarled. "It's not funny."

"Neither is being laughed at when I could have hurt myself. Help me scrape some of this off, you can wash your hands in the stream," she giped

Fields in this area were quite large, so going was easy and quick. They were exposed in the moonlight but there would be few eyes on those fields until people began to rise for work.

There were now houses both sides, and they kept quiet and low as they approached the small wood. Here they took out the compass and got their bearing. Three hundred degrees exactly from the wood. They would deviate from this heading to use the roads and tracks in the area and to cross the railway but then resume the heading at the first house south of Burton Agnes.

Several crop fields and another much larger stream were crossed after the thicket. They both washed in this stream, then continued in silence and without incident. Crossing a farm track they entered the first small wood, and the silence was broken.

"Shit, Damn, get back!" snapped Luke, suddenly jumping backwards, almost hitting Jan. "I've walked into nettles! My feet are stung all over," he winged, dancing back out and falling on the verge, holding his feet and rocking back and forth hissing and cursing.

"Do something!" he snapped. "It's driving me crazy."

"What can I do?" asked Jan, concerned and frustrated.

"See if you can find any dock leaves or something. Damn, my legs and feet are on fire. Find some leaves quick." He demanded.

"Where, there aren't any," said Jan, feeling helpless and near panic. He really seemed hurt.

"There have to be, there always are where there are nettles. Just look around!" he snapped.

Jan set off almost bent double up the track searching the hedge for large leaves she hoped would be dock leaves. Luke got up and limped back out to the farm track. He limped the other way in agony from the thousands of stings, his mind screaming, but he managed to keep to a whimper.

He found some only a few yards down the track and furiously rubbed them over the affected areas. The leaves brought some relief instantly, but not really a lot.

Jan ran up to him holding a few leaves.

"All I could find," she said, handing them over. "Is it working?" she asked as he instantly began rubbing her leaves on.

"It's eased it a bit but not much, it still hurts like hell. Tops of my feet are the worst. Might work better if I had some water to wet the leaves."

"If we go to the end of this wood you can see the trees that must be on the track we need to follow. It's just across one field. I didn't see any signs of water. We did cross that stream just back across this field, want to go back?"

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Jan felt a little calmer. He was much more rational, in control again. He'd obviously got over the shock.

"No, it wouldn't help that much. I can't just sit here they will drive me insane. Let's get going, you lead, I can hardly see for the tears in my eyes."

"We should probably run, maybe take your mind off them a bit. We probably need to do some running anyway. If we run into anybody just hold a dock leaf over yourself and ask if this is Eden. That should give them something to think about, if the size of the leaf doesn't."

"Lets go," said Luke, not impressed at all by her attempt at levity.

Jan moved quickly but carefully up the track and then set off across the field at a sprint, generally keeping to the edges. Luke kept up easily, finding the running did a lot more for the stings than dock leaves. His mind, in its indecision as to which pain was worst, sore bruised feet or stings, dulled both.

Quickly reaching the track along a small wood with a house at the end they found the surface bearable, and followed it till it joined the tarmac road that forked away to the stud farm. They ran till they reached the level crossing, then continued to jog towards Burton Agnes, until another track on the left got them back into the fields at the first house.

Only a few hundred yards brought them to the road to York, the A614. This was a main road, heavily travelled. They followed it along the edge of the field till they reached a minor cross road. Crossing the main road they climbed over a pipe gate and again passed into a crop field. Here they sat down to rest and get their bearings. Until now there had been easily recognised landmarks, but from here on it got more difficult.

"I think we need to find water for more than your stings, I'm getting very thirsty," panted Jan, recovering quickly from their long run.

"They've eased a lot, and I'm thirsty as well. The grounds rising but we're still in fields. I don't think there are any streams or anything, and I don't think it's safe drinking from these drainage ditches. I doubt if there was enough rain yesterday to fill any puddles."

"Where is the first water then?"

"I don't know, but I've never heard of anyone dying of thirst in this country."

"Oddly enough not many try to run across it in the middle of the night without any water."

"That's the heading," said Luke, ignoring her remark and pointing the way. "Only thing I can see to use as marker is that wood in the distance, just aim for the right side of it."

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"Are you sure that's three hundred, can you see the compass well enough."

"Clear as day, here. In this light we don't need luminous marks."

Jan oriented the compass and checked his marker. The trees really were the only visible feature they could aim for.

"Wonder how we're doing for time?" mused Jan.

"We probably should have done better. The next five miles is easy, dead straight on three hundred degrees. Then a slight detour round a farm and then straight again for a while. We have to do these easy bits quickly. We might have delays or detours later, and we're going to be getting weaker as the days go. If we don't get there in four nights or less I doubt we'll be able to finish at all."

"I don't know, I feel really good," said Jan.

"So do I just now, apart from the stings, but we've hardly started."

"No, I don't mean just good I mean I feel incredibly good, better than I ever have. Almost like I'm drunk but without the dizziness or anything."

"Let's hope it lasts," said Luke, dismissing her revelation as unimportant. "Come on we'd better get going."

A small stream ran into the woods at Quintin Bottom which they'd used as marker. When they reached it they risked a drink, even though there was no flow and they had to find a place where water collected. It tasted brackish but neither collapsed, and it did bring some relief to Luke's feet. They only spent a few minutes there, then continued.

Rolling farmland, mostly crops constituted the whole landscape. Patches of woods were small and scattered, often enclosing a farm, of which there were many. Roads and tracks criss-crossed the fields and at every turn nasty hedges threatened bare skin. Thorn hedges were rare, as were barbed wire and electric fences being almost totally crops in this area, but the ordinary bushes had been viciously cropped which meant thick branches even at the edge.

Illumination was near daylight to fully adjusted eyes, minus the colours, and the landscape looked very similar to daytime. The silence and lack of general movement were the only real indicators that it was the early hours of morning.

With no farms or other obstacles directly on their path they made the next four miles very quickly, quite often running for short periods but never moving at less than a fast walk. After that a detour round a farm was required but their heading was quickly resumed afterwards and four more miles slipped by uneventfully.

Several things then cropped up almost at the same time. A large wood had to be crossed first. There was a track through the wood but light inside was poor, they both moved carefully and nervously, and not just from fear of nettles. Dark shapes

seemed to move inside the wood, and several times they'd frozen in fear, only to hear or see nothing. But each time they moved on even more cautiously. Luke armed himself with a large stick, and he at least felt more comfortable.

Once through the wood the first animals were encountered, sheep. This meant they had short soft grass to ease their feet, and occasionally softer material, which had one or the other dancing while the other laughed. The rolling landscape changed at this point, and steep hillsides became common. They left the sheep to cross a road in the bottom of a valley, a hard climb was required to get out, then a village or farm built around a crossroad had to be avoided, Towthorpe.

"Which way round that?" asked Jan, sitting down on the grass verge at the side of the track heading into the village. She wasn't in any way fatigued, but she was tired. Her body knew it was time to sleep.

"North is best," said Luke, joining her on the verge. He felt very comfortable. All nerves had gone, his body had adjusted its heat output to match the circumstances, and his breathing had settled out. "There's a footpath the other side which will bring us down to a road. Just a little way north we can join a footpath, the Wolds Way. Are you still feeling drunk?"

"It's not drunk it's just good. What about you?"

"I think I'm starting to feel the same way. I'm actually enjoying this. We've covered about fifteen miles, which is unbelievable. I've got just the very faintest hope now that this might be possible, we might make it."

"I knew that for a fact after the first mile, when we got through that first village," said Jan.

"That was only a few houses, there are some towns we might have to pass through before this is over. I won't feel very safe walking down lamp lit streets no matter what time it is."

"It won't be a problem, don't worry. Come on let's get going before I fall asleep."

They walked down the road as far as they dared before taking to the fields. They skirted the farm and joined the road, heading north for a while before joining the Wolds Way footpath. Following this was easy, both for navigation and their feet and got them several miles before it became a road. This road eventually brought them to a farm, which was also the junction with the road into Leavening. They had to follow this road several miles, right through the village and on to the river Derwent.

The road into Leavening gave spectacular views of the large valley to the north in the bright moonlight, but dawn was beginning to break as they reached the village.

"What now?" asked Jan as they stood at the top of the hill surveying the first of the rapidly brightening houses.

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"Pray they aren't early risers. We'll just have to make a flat out dash through and then on to the river. There's nowhere to lay up for the day till there."

"How far is this river?"

"About three miles," replied Luke. "Exactly how much of this run have you been over? You don't seem to know a lot about it."

"None of it, didn't have chance."

"Damn! What if we get split up. You were supposed to go over what you could."

"I didn't, so there's no point worrying about it, and I don't think this is the place or time to discuss it. It's going to be broad daylight before we get to the river."

"Getting to the river in daylight doesn't worry me half as much as running through this village. It's probably half a mile through houses."

"Not much point worrying about that either, if we have to go this way let's go!"

With that she set off running down the hill towards the houses. Luke hesitated a second, he hadn't prepared himself for the run mentally. Stopping to talk was his way of getting used to the idea before actually doing it. Now Jan had gone he had to follow. She was already past the first house when he caught up.

Their feet slapped on the road, making an incredible amount of noise between the houses along the narrow road. Luke found it hard to concentrate on the road, he was scanning the houses as they flashed past for signs of movement. The brown of Jan's artificial tan showed clearly how much light there was, and the noise of their panting and feet slapping echoed down the road.

Before they were half way through Luke stopped worrying about the houses, and began to worry about himself physically. He was having trouble keeping up with Jan. By the time they came to the last few houses she'd pulled away from him thirty or forty yards, and he suddenly got a spasm of fear that he might end up on his own. His legs just wouldn't move any faster and he was already completely out of breath and slowing because of that.

Jan suddenly turned off the road and stopped at a short section of railed fence, virtually collapsing onto it. She was gasping for breath as bad as Luke, but he doubted being able to reach the fence. He did manage to keep going and staggered to the fence at walking pace. Neither could speak at all, both gasping loudly and even coughing occasionally. They were only a few yards past the last house, still clearly in view to almost the whole village. Luke pushed himself off the railings, finding his legs very unsteady.

"Got to go!" he panted, finding it difficult to get enough breath to speak. "Walk a bit," he gasped, indicating forward.

Jan nodded and also pushed herself from the support of the fence. She staggered out into the road almost as badly as Luke, and they began a slow walk up the hill. By the time they reached two outlying houses each side of the road they were managing a more normal walk and gasping had been replaced by heavy panting. Luke barely gave them a glance. If anyone saw them they were caught, there was no chance of outrunning a tortoise, he wouldn't even bother trying, just surrender.

Although it seemed to take forever, walking in broad daylight like a couple on a leisurely stroll they did eventually reach a cross road. Here they both flopped down on the verge. Exhaustion put them beyond caution. They both sat hugging their knees for what seemed a very long time, but was probably less than ten minutes. Then they wearily got to their feet and continued at a faster walk.

Jan still tended to move ahead, but Luke kept a short way behind, not letting her get a lead. In that position he studied her as she walked, watching her muscles move and change shape each step. Her black stripes were fading a little and when the sun hit her back the tan stood out almost red in the early light. This camouflage didn't work at all well in daylight on a grey road, they stood out like beacons to anybody glancing this way from miles away. Luke decided that Jan was a decidedly pleasant looking beacon, much more so now than when they started.

As they crossed the bridge they could see one lone fisherman setting up. They weren't hidden if he chose to look that way but the sun was low and behind them, shining directly towards him. They gave him no thought and moved into the woods along the road.

There were small fir trees along the road, very dense, almost bushes in places. Under them years accumulation of pine needles and some grass meant they had a good choice for a comfortable nest. The one they chose was nearer the road than they would have liked but was a perfect little camp. Once through the dry grass there was a clear area softly lined. It was closed all round from view by the bush itself and thick undergrowth around it. Virtually nothing was said as they both curled into the smallest ball they could and fell asleep.

Chapter 2.

"What is it, what's wrong?" croaked Luke, trying to shake off sleep. Jan had disturbed his rest, roused him before he'd had enough sleep, before he was ready to wake. Luke was not the kind that came instantly to consciousness. He needed a long warm up period, time to get reality in focus, even more time when dreams were cut short. On this particular occasion he was having much more than his usual difficulty convincing himself the dreams had stopped.

"Nothing wrong," whispered Jan. "I've been awake a while though, I'm going out to get a drink and maybe a wash."

Something about that statement didn't sound quite right, didn't fit with the reality he'd almost convinced himself of. He needed more information.

"What time is it?" he asked, still unable to get his mind round anything more useful than that.

"Keep your voice down!" hissed Jan urgently. "There are people all around, fishermen and walkers. I don't know what time it is, but late morning I should think."

Now Luke came fully awake, his mind working well enough to be aware of their situation, and to understand what she'd said.

"There are people all round and you're going out for a wash?" he said incredulously.

"They're not in this wood, just along the road and the river. I'm going to the stream, that's away from the road."

Luke sat up, his head just brushing the lower branches of the bush. This was a cosy little nest, completely roofed by the dense bush and walled partly by it and the long grass and other

weeds. They had some view out to the morning sunshine but it was very limited. Cars could be heard on the road no more than twenty feet away but could not be seen.

"Can't you wait till later for a wash, like till we finish. You're going to get filthy again anyway as soon as we start. This isn't a Sunday picnic"

"It's not just a wash, I'm bored, and there are other things I have to do. Anyway we're going to be here hours and being clean can only improve that."

"Here is the middle of the country, naked, painted like tigers and surrounded by normal people. Don't you think it's just possible they might have a problem with the way we're attired, like where to lock us up."

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"I need a wash!" she stated harshly.

Luke sighed, he didn't want to hear things like this, but she had a point, they were filthy, and he probably smelled. Left to himself he would have dispensed with personal hygiene until

this was over, but he had to give Jan some consideration. He couldn't smell himself but she'd be able to.

"All right, we'll go to the stream," said Luke, wearily moving to get out.

"No!" hissed Jan, "I go first and then when I get back you can go."

At last it dawned on Luke what she had to do, and he blushed at his own stupidity. When he thought about it he found that he needed to do similar things. If she hadn't mentioned it he would probably have waited until desperate, then sat on nettles in his haste, and the dark. Now in daylight made more sense.

"All right go, but be careful. We don't want to get caught now after coming all this way, and if anyone sees you we would be caught. There's nowhere to run or hide here, and this is a very small wood."

Jan turned and scrambled out of their nest. Sticking her head above the undergrowth showed no one in sight, either in the wood or along the barely visible road. Moving carefully through the broken twigs and fallen branches, keeping as low she could she made her way to the stream. It was large and fast flowing although at the moment low. Moving downstream along the edge she found a place suitable for necessities then waded through the mud till the water was above her knees and proceeded to wash herself.

Each splash of the cold water made her shiver and draw breath, but she was determined to get as clean as possible. In the daylight dried mud streaks from the nights travel showed up well, and she felt uncomfortable. She'd even got mud in her hair, and this caused her long thought before she finally decided it had to be washed.

After she'd got used to the water she took a deep breath and bent to throw water on her hair, then froze as she heard voices very close by. People appeared no more than fifty feet away, clearly visible to her through the sparse growth separating them from her. Keeping as still as a statue she just stared at them, terrified that any movement would give her away. She could clearly see the bridge they were crossing, and she could see no reason why they couldn't clearly see her.

There were four of them, two women and two men, probably in their fifties. They stared straight at her for some time, but didn't stop, and their conversation continued at a low level as though nothing unusual were happening. Just ramblers out for a days walk, admiring the scenery along the stream.

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They seemed to take forever to cross the bridge, but as they neared the end Jan let herself breathe, and prepared to get up, but others appeared behind them just starting the bridge. This time a whole group came into view. They also stared directly at her, but also continued.

Jan kept perfectly still, slightly bent with her hands in the water as she'd just been about to splash her hair as they appeared. She stayed that way paralysed for what seemed an eternity in the freezing water, as they all seemed to stare directly at her for a while as they passed.

She couldn't understand why they didn't react, they had to see her. Perhaps they were used to strange sights, and took them in their stride. Perhaps they were just being reserved. Perhaps they couldn't see her clearly because of her camouflage, but they certainly would if she moved, and they'd hear the water splashing.

Jan almost collapsed as the last of them passed out of sight. She scrambled out of the stream frozen stiff. She'd spent ages in the water, her hands and legs were white. Washing her hair was totally out of the question. She ran almost heedless through the undergrowth back to the nest.

"Dozens of people saw me!" she panted as she dived through the entrance forcing Luke into the brush. "They all stared at me as I was stood in the stream," she said, almost in tears.

"They saw you? What did they do?" demanded Luke, almost panicking, feeling suddenly trapped. His worst nightmare having come true. She'd blown it for a stupid wash.

"Nothing, they just stared for a while and kept going."

That didn't sound at all right. People who saw a naked girl painted like a tiger in a stream wouldn't do nothing. He didn't know exactly what they would do though. He couldn't even imagine what he'd have done if he'd been one of them. It wasn't the kind of situation that cropped up every day.

"How do you know they saw you, if they didn't do anything?"

"They looked at me. There was only a few branches in the way. I could see their faces as clear as a bell. I just froze as they appeared. I hadn't even noticed the bridge. I'm sorry Luke, I didn't mean to ruin this for you."

"You haven't, I don't think they saw you or they'd have done something if only laugh. If you were stood in the river in the shade keeping still what could they have seen through even a few leaves. The stripes break up your shape if you're not in full view, the leaves would have reflected light. At best all they would see is a few brown and black stripes. This camouflage probably works better than you think.

"Anyway even if they saw you they did nothing, so they probably don't care. They might often see people washing themselves in streams if they're rambles."

"With tiger stripes all over them?"

"You have a point, but that only reinforces my confidence that they didn't see you. Don't worry about it. I'm going down now. If I see any signs of people searching the area we'll just stay in here quiet. They'd have to be really serious to find this place."

Luke went down to the stream very carefully, moving quickly from one patch of concealment to another, always stopping and scanning all directions. He found the place where Jan had washed, evidenced by numerous bare footprints in the mud. The bridge was very close, and he would have expected anyone on it to be able to see someone out in the stream. He moved a little way upstream before getting a very quick, cold wash, then went carefully back.

"I don't know how they didn't see you. Couldn't you have found a stage with a spotlight or something. That would only have been marginally more obvious than the place you chose," he said sarcastically.

"I didn't see the bridge! I was watching the direction of the road, I didn't know there was another. I don't remember crossing it this morning."

"We did. I'm going to try to finish my sleep. By the looks of the sun it probably isn't much past ten. Best thing we can both do is sleep till nearly dark."

Luke curled up again to sleep. He was feeling a little chilled here in the shade. The day would probably warm up but not till afternoon.

"I'm freezing," said Jan hugging her knees. "I was stuck in the water for ages, and now I feel really cold."

"Curl up and I'll curl round you, keep us both warm."

Luke said it without really thinking what such close contact entailed when they were both naked. He almost retracted the offer before Jan could sneer at him as soon as he thought about it, but she said nothing. She lay on her side and curled in a ball with her back to him. That said a great deal about how cold she must be.

Luke carefully wrapped round her, his stomach and chest against her back. She didn't feel all that cold, but she did feel nice.

"That things on again," she remarked casually.

The way she said it made Luke feel easier, less embarrassed. This time it was sexual arousal and she had to know that. Treating it lightly defused any situation that might have developed.

"Glad you told me, I wouldn't have known."

"Just watch what you do with it, I don't want any surprises."

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"Don't worry, it's not Christmas."

"Just so you understand that," she retorted.

Luke had to smile. If anyone did start searching the woods for them she could cut her way out with her razor wit.

Luke didn't get to sleep again. It was totally impossible curled around Jan as he was. The feeling was so pleasant that he didn't mind, it was worth losing sleep over. Although sex did enter his mind once or twice...a minute, it was more just cuddling a warm soft relaxed female body. He wasn't at all tense, as he would have expected, and the rest probably did him as much good as sleep would have.

When Jan woke he didn't want to let go, so pretended to be asleep, expecting her to carefully untangle herself. A sharp elbow in the ribs broke the trance, and caused him considerable pain. He recoiled away from her.

"Awake I see," said Jan. "Is it time to go yet?"

"No need for that!" snapped Luke, rubbing his lower rib area.

"It was only a gentle nudge to get you off me. Is it time to go?"

"Not really, but most of the people have gone, it's been quiet for some time. If you've anything you want to do it's probably safe at the stream now."

"I think I've had enough cold water for today. How's your feet?"

"If you mean the stings they've more or less gone. If you mean the soles they're sore and bruised, very tender."

"So are mine. How far have we come?"

"Twenty five miles roughly, in a straight line."

"That's not bad for four or five hours," said Jan, feeling quite proud of herself.

"It's less than a marathon, and top runners do those in just over two hours. We'd be coming in with the over eighties at that time. It isn't bad for us though, and if we can keep that kind of pace we might finish in three nights. Can't see that happening though."

"We might. It's all these hedges and things that slow us, we've probably done twice that distance. On the moors there won't be as many. I'm not bothered anyway. What's the rush?" She was thoroughly enjoying the whole thing.

Luke probably was as well, but he was cautious by nature and could foresee hard times not far ahead. The human body didn't run forever without fuel. His particular model had never had to run more than a few hours without it before. Jan didn't look starved either, in fact she looked incredible, and Luke had to shake his head. She'd

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never looked that great before to him. He decided it was probably just lust, she was nude and in close proximity.

"The rush is because the longer we're wondering about the country naked the more chance of getting caught, not to mention food or the weather. It could get very cold, and I'm allergic to freezing to death."

"Don't worry, I'll keep you warm." She rattled the film case fastened to her wrist with elastic containing the five matches. Luke just smiled. He was thinking more of the two pounds and phone number, also in her case. His case had the map drawn on a strip of tissue paper and he had the compass.

"You'd have to think of some other way to keep me warm. If we use the matches the run's over, we've failed. Apart from the fact it would be cheating to have a fire it would also be dangerous and we'd almost certainly be caught."

"I'm sure I'd think of something... Other than what you keep thinking," she added, indicating his growing arousal.

He just moaned and rolled onto his side with his back to her and curled in a ball. He wasn't sure whether he was angry at her going on about it, angry that it kept happening or frustrated that it was unfulfilled.

"Don't pretend to go to sleep again, we should be starting. Sun's already down."

"There are still fishermen along the river. It's too light yet, they'll see us," he replied from his curled position.

"You haven't been out, how do you know there's anyone on the river?"

"I'm not as deaf as you apparently are. I can hear a radio."

Jan listened quietly for a while, and did catch snatches of faint music. She sat hugging her knees, bored.

"Wish they'd either go or turn it up so I can hear it."

"Why don't you go towards the river and see how many there are, but be careful."

Jan didn't argue, which surprised Luke. She quietly got out and disappeared towards the river. She returned almost at once.

"Just one I can see and he's packing up. Didn't see a radio though, and I could hear it better down there."

"All right, when the radio goes we will. Lay down and rest till then."

Jan sat hugging her knees again looking at Luke's back. The sight wasn't at all unpleasant, that's what made her so agitated and impatient to go, that and the fact that when lying down she felt like a hedgehog with the spikes inside.

Chapter 3.

After the radio had been silent for some time they felt it safe to leave. It was still light but there were no houses or other sign of habitation nearby. They scrambled out of their den and crawled through the thick growth to the road. Peering through the fence showed no signs of people.

"What do you think?" asked Luke. "Scramble through the woods or take the road?" His vote was obvious by the way he phrased the question. He'd already tasted what cutting through woods could mean. His feet still itched.

"Don't fancy 'scrambling through the woods' as you put it. But if we run into that crowd of rambles I'm not jumping in the river."

"You won't have to, just stand still, they're all blind anyway. If they couldn't see you in the stream it can only be because they were tapping their way along with white sticks."

"More sticks I have to watch out for!"

Luke just smiled and shook his head. "Come on let's go."

They climbed through the fence rails and quickly marched along the road. A quarter of a mile brought them to the end of the wood. No cars had come while they were on the road but it led into a small village, Barton-le-Willows, so they decided to get back to fields.

Only one field needed crossing before they came to small roads, and these were used to reach the A64, a dual carriageway, busy with holiday makers returning from the coast. Crouching in the hedge bottom waiting for a gap in the traffic annoyed Luke, made him feel anxious. The distance to go seemed to stretch at every delay. To Jan it was just an opportunity to rest, which she took full advantage of while Luke fidgeted and cursed the traffic.

When a gap finally appeared Luke almost dragged Jan up and sprinted across both carriageways through a break in the central divide and onto a minor road. It was still not really dark so they were still exposed to traffic on the main road. They continued at a run up the small road until they reached a footpath, and paused there for a few minutes to get their breath, then continued at a fast walk.

This footpath crossed several fields and two streams before reaching a railway. They crossed the railway then left the footpath to follow the lines until they entered a cutting. Here the lines veered off and the compass once again became their guide across the farmland.

This area differed slightly in that there were more grazing pastures, which meant more barbed wire. They had become quite adept at getting over such obstacles, and

the grass was much kinder to their feet, which were so far standing up surprisingly well, the tenderness quickly going once underway. They did encounter a few animals with attitudes but could usually recognise these before entering the field, and go around those fields. Rapid exits were occasionally required from fields, and Luke threw his stick at a particularly belligerent sheep, but in general this was the easiest part of the journey so far.

It was just getting fully dark as they came to Whitecar ings. No moon till around midnight meant it really was dark, so instead of crossing the open marshes they stayed on tracks and roads, moving off these only to go round the only farm encountered. This way they crossed the ings without any watery mishaps, eventually emerging onto a road near a farm and right at the start of a footpath.

The footpath led into a park with woods along the south edge of a village. It was a well used footpath and made safe walking even in the dark. They walked casually along and spoke quietly as they moved, both very relaxed. They had become complacent because it seemed so easy, and for that reason were not as cautious as they should have been, walking through a wood so close to a town. The moon had just appeared and they were slowly gaining vision.

A scraping noise behind stopped them dead, sent ice down their spines and into their stomachs. They both spun round to see two dark figures very close and coming straight at them. Luke tensed for fight automatically, but then a flashlight came on blinding him. A few seconds complete confusion followed as Luke tried in vain to see what was happening. He could hear frightened protests from Jan but she was also blind and confused. Surprise had been absolute.

Dark shapes eventually began to appear as the light in his head slowly subsided, but they were moving about and he couldn't focus on anyone because the light was flashing about. He caught glimpses of Jan's stripes but she was struggling with the other two. He felt completely helpless, then a stick was poked into his ribs, stunning him even more.

"Get lost creep before I smash your head in."

The voice carried real venom and threat. It belonged to a man probably around twenty. Luke's eyes were clearing enough to make him out because the light was held by the other and shinning at the floor, he was also holding Jan. The one with the stick threatening Luke was well built, heavier than Luke, and the stick was a sizeable club. Luke's chances were zero against them.

Jan looked defeated, and turned pleading eyes to Luke. She was terrified, with good reason, this was a very dangerous situation. One that had never occurred to either of them while planning this run. Luke had carried a stick himself for a while but threw it at a sheep earlier, he now regretted that.

Luke hesitated between taking a swing at the man or trying for the other, then he turned and ran off down the path towards the village. He could almost hear the gasp from Jan as he sped away, and the grins from the men.

Luke screamed at the top of his voice 'RAPE RAPE RAPE' as he ran. The village was on the edge of the wood, less than a hundred yards. Any grins the men might have had disappeared instantly. The noise he was making would bring the whole village out. They released Jan and rocketed off back down the path away from the village. Within seconds they were out of sight, and so was Luke in the other direction. He'd stopped shouting.

Jan at first had difficulty standing, her legs had turned to jelly, but by sheer will she managed to keep them locked. Her shaking increased greatly as she stood alone on the path feeling somehow stupid. The increased shaking was due to anger reinforcing the fear of a moment ago.

"Luke you cowardly arshole I'm gonna kill you!" she blustered, trying to stomp forward but not managing much more than a stagger. "I'll smash your bloody yellow face in when I get you. You can't hide, I'll just follow the yellow shit trail."

After only fifty yards Luke stepped out in front of her.

"Got rid of them didn't it!"

"You shit!" she snarled as she swung her fist at him, missing and throwing herself on the grass. Luke moved towards her to help but she lashed out again and he backed off.

"You bastard!" she snarled again, trying to get up.

"Keep your voice down, there's a town just over there!" he hissed.

"Didn't seem to worry you as you ran off to save your arse. What was that you shouted, Oh yes, I remember. RAPE RAPE!" she screamed at the top of her voice. Luke backed away looking up and down the path.

"Shut up or somebody will hear you. We'll both end up in jail."

"You will. RAPE RAPE."

Luke jumped about nervously. "All right, what are you going to tell them, that I painted you and walked you half way across the country. Don't be stupid, we'd both be arrested."

"You left me to those two!" now she was sobbing, the anger having faded a little and all other emotions coming out.

"What else could I do? We both got away unharmed, if I'd tried to fight them I'd have been mashed. I'm naked, they had clothes, shoes and a club. Come on get up,

we have to get going before the whole village turns up, or they come back." He moved again to help her up, but she threw his arms away.

"If they hadn't run off I'd have come back and tried to take them on. I wouldn't have taken off and left you, or stood by and watched them harm you. Come on Jan think it through. Doing anything other than I did would have at the very least ended the run and put somebody in hospital, either me or those two. If I could have beaten them I'd have had to hurt them badly because I'm too vulnerable to risk them getting up for another go. That puts them in hospital and us in the police station.

"Much more likely they'd have kicked the shit out of me and raped you, probably putting us both in hospital. Come on get up and let's get away from here before they have another go, or the whole town turns up to see what the noise is."

Jan slowly rose to her feet and wiped her eyes. She moved off down the path and Luke moved with her, keeping enough distance so that he could dodge any blow she threw. They walked in silence for quite some time before she spoke.

"Bet those two are still running." She burst out laughing. The whole thing was too ridiculous to do anything else.

"They might not be the only ones. We're in a town park, there have to be other couples here. They had to hear us. There might be half the males in the district running round without their trousers."

"And half the women laid under bushes without their knickers, all cursing us," she laughed. "I still can't believe what you did. 'rape, rape,'" she mimicked quietly, almost breaking into hysterics. "If I live a thousand years I won't forget this trip."

"If we make it to the coast I'll have aged a thousand years," replied Luke. "Come on we're getting too near the houses. Off this path here and into the field."

"You could never understand how stupid and rejected I felt when I was left standing there by myself, with you running one way shouting rape and the other two running the other way," said Jan struggling over the fence. Her muscles were still weak from the adrenaline pounding they'd received.

"And you could never understand how hard it was for me to run off."

"Bruise your ego a bit?"

"Strangely enough no. On this trip I don't really think I have any ego, or it's not important. I'm not a hero type either. I'm not quite sure why it was hard to run. My first impulse was just to take a swing at them, but I couldn't because of you being right in the middle and I couldn't see well. That probably saved us both by giving me time to come to my senses and think."

"What would you have said if you'd run into anybody."

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"I hadn't figured that far, and wouldn't even like to think about it. It's getting really dark again, clouds have covered the moon. Hope it doesn't rain, it's not supposed to."

"Would you really have fought for me?"

"Of course. Don't want my front getting as cold as my back was when we camped."

"You should have said your back was cold," exclaimed Jan, shocked.

"Why, what would you have done?" asked Luke hopefully.

"Sympathised."

Streams were becoming much more numerous, and sometimes quite large, so were villages. Once away from Sutton on the forest they were in fields again, but now in near blackness. This made the streams more dangerous, and they ended up in several that were unseen in their haste.

They had to rush, because both realised this would be their last easy night. Food was already impinging on their minds and would shortly be almost overpowering. Tonight would burn off any vestiges of nutrients in their system and then they'd be relying entirely on any stored fat that could be converted. As fat conversion was not fast they would probably slow considerably.

Dodging several villages and crossing one main road and railway eventually brought them to the river Ure. This was the first and only river they may have to swim. A detour to bridges south was too far and to the bridge north meant they had to go through or north of Borough Bridge to cross the A1. It had to be crossed at a bridge because even at this time of night, sometime around two, it was still busy.

"Which way now?" asked Jan, emerging onto the path along the river.

"Straight across. There's a path at the other side we can use for a while."

"It's a river! Where's the bridge?" Jan was hungry cold and tired, and the obvious didn't appeal to her at all.

"We can't use a bridge, we have to swim. It's not very wide." Luke also didn't fancy a swim just now, but saw no alternative.

"It's pitch black, I'm freezing and hungry and you've got to be joking. You can't see the other side properly, how do you know we could get out there. What's the current like, how cold is it. We can't go just jumping in rivers we know nothing about in the dark, that's crazy."

"Jan I don't have time to argue. We either swim or the run's over because there is no other way. Standing here arguing is only wasting time we can't afford." With that Luke climbed down the low bank into the river and with a gasp pushed out as hard as he could. He was across in a very short time and scrambling up the bank.

He had trouble shouting to Jan because his teeth chattered, but he managed to convey to her that it was no problem. If Jan had argued he would have gone on without her because he had to get moving very soon, he was dangerously cold. Fortunately she didn't argue, merely cursed him quietly as she got in the water. She raced across and frantically scrambled at the bank. Luke helped pull her out, she was almost in shock from the cold.

"Come on let's run!" he stuttered, pulling her onto the path and setting off along it at a dangerous pace in the dark.

They sped past a small village then cut across a field to a road. By now they had warmed up considerably and slowed to their fast walk along the road. About two miles along several small roads and a cut across fields brought them to the A1. They walked quickly across a major intersection over it and immediately took to the fields again.

For three miles after the A1 they were traversing familiar fields, but then the landscape changed, hills became steeper and more frequent. Because of fatigue and to save time they diverted through the village of Bishop Monkton on the road, and then followed the west road out for about three miles before having once again to go cross country.

For the next two miles they were in and out of the broken wooded areas. Paths were used when possible but often they were small and overgrown which slowed them considerably trying to pick their way through without being ripped to shreds.

As the woods ended the moors proper began, and numerous footpaths got them a good start. Although both very tired they ran for short distances whenever they could. They were approaching Pately Bridge and dawn wasn't far off.

Threading their way through numerous houses they waded across the river nidd just north of Pately Bridge, then followed a road west along a stream that climbed with the stream high onto the moors. The road passed through several caravan parks but both Jan and Luke were so tired they didn't worry about being seen, walking quite openly between the caravans in the growing light.

When the tarmac was replaced by packed stones they used the verge to walk. Here the track climbed quite steeply in places. This was originally a mine road but the mines were long abandoned, the roads being kept open for farm use and walkers, this particular part was a part of the Nidderdale way.

The other side of the valley branched out. There were old mine workings in the bottom, and the Nidderdale way branched off here and wound down to the bottom

then up the branch. They were quite some distance above the workings, which were across the stream. There was a wood in a gully climbing away from the track on their side and they entered this wood. Carefully picking their way ever higher they cleared the woods emerging high on the moors.

Finding a quiet area they made a nest for themselves in dense ferns high on a hillside and curled up as before for sleep. It was now broad daylight.

"I don't think I can do another night like that. I feel as weak as a kitten," said Jan softly.

"I'm the same," replied Luke, nuzzling the back of her neck. "I'm not sleepy type tired, just worn out from constantly climbing. I'm cold as well, and I was even colder as we crossed the river."

"What do you think about daytime across the moors?" asked Jan, feeling sunshine more than made up for the danger of detection. "At least we'll be warm, and we're heading through pretty barren areas."

"I've been thinking about that myself. We've less than forty miles to go, if we walked through the afternoon we might make it to the coast before morning, or at least get very close."

"The way I feel just now I doubt getting four miles, never mind forty," she sighed.

"Try to get some sleep if you can, doubt if I will. But at least I'll get some rest."

There was a long pause, Luke thought Jan had gone to sleep, but then she spoke softly.

"If you want to do something to warm you up I won't mind."

Luke burst out laughing.

"Screw you!" snarled Jan.

"Jan that's an offer I've prayed for most of this trip so far, but now I don't have the strength. That's something else I never thought to hear myself say. And even if I found it I know I couldn't use up that much energy and still be able to walk out of here later. Thank you very much for the offer and I appreciate the concern behind it."

"You're probably right. Running round the woods a few times would burn up energy, and my back would get cold."

"Wouldn't want you getting any colder than you are."

"Bitchy," replied Jan.

