

## **A United Front**

**Breakfast was a shambles. Cook overslept, and nothing was ready.**

**Mummy and Papa had raced out to the stables with just a cup of tea and cold toast for the season's first formal hunt.**

**As Master of the Hunt, Papa had to be at the meet early enough to check the hunt list, inspect the hounds, and ensure that the whippers-in and riders were ready. Since autumn training hunts were over, Papa also rode as Field Master for the Bramblehurst Hunt Club at the head of the field of riders just behind the hounds. Mummy, as usual, would be hot on his heels. Being late as well as hungry would put them both in a foul mood.**

**Edwina smiled over her breakfast. She and her younger brother, Bentley ate Cook's belated offering in silence while loading up for their day. Edwina could have been riding as a hill-topper, following the field at a distance without jumping, but she had refused to have anything to do with the hunt. She loved the horses and hounds, but her love for animals went much farther. Bentley, in spite of his sturdy frame, was violently allergic to horses. After all the tests, pills, and injections, Bentley had gravitated toward his older sister. She took him into the woods and showed him the hidden nests**

of wood pigeons and the hiding places of grouse. Together, they found moles and stoats living in hidden corners of unfarmed fields. In fair weather, the two children tramped over the acreage belonging to their father and the nearest neighbors. On rainy days, Edwina and Bentley curled up with Papa's books on animals and fieldcraft. Bentley grew to love the creatures inhabiting the countryside. The two had even named the wild animals just as their parents had named their horses and hounds. Mummy and Papa ignored the children except for their attendance at church and family occasions. Today, Edwina promised Bentley, the two would not be ignored.

“Finish up,” Edwina said, “I heard the horns when we sat down. The hunt is on. We've got ground to cover.”

The two ran out the French doors through the garden into the woods. The hounds would take some time to cast for scent. Once the hounds gave tongue, events would begin to pick up speed. The two jogged for twenty minutes along paths they knew as well as their own driveway. They slowed to a walk as they crossed a stream.

Bentley gasped, “Are we going to see Fiona and Clancy? The fox pair was his particular favorite.”

Edwina nodded, “Their kits are nearly old enough to leave the den. We’re going to make sure they’re safe. Hurry, I heard the horns. The pack must have the scent.”

Edwina knew that Fiona would stay with the kits while Clancy led the hunt away from the den. She also knew that half of the hound pack were older dogs who might catch the den’s scent. She had to make sure they were distracted. Jogging again, Edwina and Bentley came to the clearing behind the den. The hunting horns blared in the distance. The hounds’ barks were closer.

The two children stood in front of the fallen tree where the fox pair had made their den. Clancy had somehow gotten on a lower limb of a tree behind them. Edwina knew that Clancy wanted to be seen in order to lead the pack away, deeper into the woods. The rising sound of hoofbeats blended with the hounds’ baying. The pack would approach the fallen tree at speed. The younger hounds would leap over the fallen tree while the older dogs would flow around the obstacle. Just behind the leaping hounds would come the hunt, led by Papa sailing over the fallen tree. As the children stepped even closer to the fallen tree, the hoofbeats and the horns grew closer.

Bentley took Edwina’s hand. “Do you think Papa will recognize us? The hoofbeats rose like autumn thunder.