

CHAPTER 1

Jeremy Faversham was astride his favourite animal. His beloved hunter Bonus Magnet was part Irish Draught, part English thoroughbred; at seventeen hands and eight years old, Jeremy knew he had been a good find. On a brisk January morning like this, he could think of nowhere he would rather be than in the saddle, hacking across the glorious Cotswold countryside. He was among friends and the cares, and stresses of the working world were far, far away.

No two foxhunts were ever alike. The continuous chaos of the chase appealed to him. He knew he must be constantly alert; that he must rigidly stick to the centuries old protocols and accept the inevitable uncertainty.

Foxhunting really was a way of life rather than a mere sport, Jeremy reflected, as he negotiated a tricky downhill slope. Over the years, it had framed his life. While he was in the City working at the bank, he often caught himself viewing his financial experiences in a hunting context.

Like him, the fox was a predator. Jeremy Faversham might have appeared to be the country gentleman, suitably attired for the occasion, but there were skeletons in the closet. Those skeletons had attracted the attention of several groups of people. Some of those people were currently watching Jeremy as he made his way across open ground towards Downend Farm.

The Phoenix was one such man who had a pair of field glasses fixed on the edge of the copse. He was not only following the banker's progress. He was keeping an eye on the hunt saboteurs too, who were lurking in the cover of the trees. From time to time, he switched his attention to the hunt followers. At least having a moving target eased the boredom.

"Everything going as planned?" asked Colin quietly.

"He's heading in the right direction," replied Rusty, a few hundred yards further on. He was watching events unfold from the opposite side of the field.

"I'll keep tabs on the great unwashed and the hunt supporters; try to make sure they don't get in the way of things" Colin replied "although, it's good to have them around. It will muddy the waters when they start investigating the accident."

"Roger that" replied Rusty "I'll move ahead and confirm the equipment is positioned correctly. I'll double check too that our clean-up crew are fully alert and poised to move in as soon as our target is down."

The Olympus agents resumed their duties; communication needed to be kept to a minimum on an operation like this. There were too many different parties scattered across this small corner of the West Country, all with their own agenda. The days when the hunting crowd had these fields and woods to themselves and their sport were long gone.

Donald Chalmers had worked at Downend Farm for over fifty years. He had gone straight from school to work on the land. He was now retired and living in a cottage about half a mile from where he was standing. He had been part of the hunting scene in these parts all his life. His wife Catherine had passed away seven years ago and they had had no children to help fill the cottage with warmth and laughter. Instead, they had spent much of their lives outdoors; they had enjoyed the companionship of, and working with horses and dogs day by day. It was an uncomplicated style of country living that was now very quickly disappearing.

Donald had risen early, just as he had every morning of his working life. Nothing had changed. He saw no reason to stay in bed now that he was retired. He had walked across from his cottage to this spot, his usual vantage point. A place he had occupied on dozens of occasions before. A place he knew would give him a glimpse of his old life. He might not be out there in the midst of the action any more, but he could tell anyone who would listen to him what was what.

As he had made his way slowly up the path to the stile, the trees had thinned out, and he had seen a small gathering of watchers huddled against each other by the fencing. All of them were dressed for sitting in their cars rather than standing on a chilly stretch of Cotswold countryside in the early morning. Donald smiled to himself; not because of their discomfort, but because he knew that he almost certainly had an audience.

Donald nodded a greeting as heads turned to acknowledge his arrival.

“Morning” he said “shall we see some sport today do you think?”

Very few intelligent comments came in response to his question. Donald knew his educational commentary would be falling on virgin territory. These were townsfolk trying to get a true experience of country life, without getting their brand new boots dirty or any snags from thorns or branches in their fashionable jackets. Thank goodness, he had not stumbled upon a group of bloody saboteurs. If they had found his favourite spot, he would have had to walk another mile or so to get as good a viewing point as this.

Donald started to tell his unwitting students about the fox and his many attributes. “A fox can identify changes in temperature, a subtle change in the speed of the wind; he knows the lie of the land, he knows accurately the distances between strategic points. He knows who you are and who I am. He can tell the difference between when a human being is wearing hunt kit and when they are not.”

Donald pointed down to the far left hand side of the field. “Can you see the way the land drops away sharply over yonder? If they have picked him up, the fox will head for there and we will see him dart over the brow of the hill. When he reaches the bottom level, he will have earned himself some time. The hunters will be slow negotiating the steep descent and the hounds will fall back a touch. He will dash into the woods and into a covert; he could emerge in a while and go down to the stream, or he could lie low for an hour or two. By the time the hounds re-discover his scent, he will be long gone. He will be strolling leisurely back to his den. If they are lucky and keep on him then he will take them further on into the woods. He understands that the hunter is at a huge disadvantage on rough terrain and that not every pack of hounds can deal with the thick clinging undergrowth that they will find in there. You mark my words; by and large, the fox decides when the chase is over; not the hunter or the hounds.”

Donald took his hip flask from his inside pocket and took a swig. The fire of the brandy warmed him as it made its way down. He basked in the glow of admiration from his students who had soon recognised they were in the presence of a real countryman. They all resumed their vigil in silence.

A little further on, closer to the sounds of the approaching hunt, Wayne Saunders had his own set of binoculars. He was checking out where his other ‘sabs’ were, making sure they were best placed to disrupt proceedings. Wayne had been at this game for almost a decade. He got involved while he was at Bristol University, although in truth he had not needed much persuading. When the ban had come into force, they had thought they had won. Seven years later, they were more active than ever.

Wayne knew that most hunts knew exactly which woods harboured fox-cubs. Patches of wood or

brush, owned and protected by hunt supporters, were where the fox might have their litter. Many foxes stayed in the same coverts from generation to generation. Wayne and his cronies had learned this and kept records of which woods to police and which to ignore.

A lot of the 'sabs' work was carried out before the meet even started. One of the best methods was to pre-spray. Wayne delegated that job. He had done it when he was a rookie, but it meant getting up extremely early and Wayne was no fool. As this was one of the first meets of the season he had several 'sabs' out in the fields ready to start blowing horns and calling. This blowing and calling was to confuse any new hounds and try to wrest control of the pack from the huntsman.

This morning he had asked his rookies to lay a few false trails too, so that if the dogs became interested in the false trail, then they could increase the blowing and calling. Wayne had seen this tactic work on several occasions and in very soon he would see whether all their preparation paid off.

Jeremy Faversham was still galloping in pursuit of the bulk of the mounted field. He was not a fit and healthy young man any longer; too many executive lunches and fine dining in the evenings and at the weekend for that. His horse was sound and keen as mustard, but the extra weight he was forced to carry meant that Jeremy was some way off the pace these days.

A large proportion of the field, the members of which paid their subs or 'cap' money on the day for a good ride across the countryside, rarely saw a kill or the hounds at work. The majority cared little for the technicalities of hunting and the Field Master kept them in the background until the hounds were well on the fox's scent. Only at the very end were they encouraged to follow on at close quarters.

The overweight banker and Bonus Magnet were nearing the woods. Each rider had their own particular route through familiar parts of the ground over which they were hunting. Jeremy had used the same approach many times before to the five barred gate that gave the rider access to the scrubby bushes and trees lining the wooden fencing that indicated the boundary to Downend Farm.

The Phoenix and his Olympus colleagues knew this route too. They had studied Jeremy Faversham for some time. Jeremy would take the easy route and thread his way slowly through the trees and bushes until he reached the far side of the woods. As he had lost all the momentum that his gallop had provided, then he dismounted, opened the gate, and led his horse into the next field. He would close the gate behind him and set off once more.

This less dangerous short cut quite often brought Jeremy closer to the action, while many of his companions risked life and limb trying to clear fences and fallen trees. On other occasions if the fox led the pack in a different direction altogether, then Jeremy was one of the last to arrive back at The Old Bell Inn, where all the riders and followers met up.

Bonus Magnet was gamely galloping onwards. The gate was now clearly visible. Jeremy and his horse were quite alone; isolated from the main bunch of riders by physique and design in equal parts. Bonus Magnet weighed up the obstacle. He recognised its construction and its size. Clearing this gate would not be a test for him. Landing on the other side with his rider thumping down in the saddle after the exhilarating leap, that was another matter.

There were two strides left to the gate. Suddenly there was a noise. There was some thing on the other side. No, not some thing, someone; in his final seconds Jeremy Faversham saw a figure spring up from the bushes. His brain tried frantically to process what it was as he catapulted forward out of the saddle.

Bonus Magnet had cleared the gate but crumpled on landing. The poor horse had spotted

something apparently materialising out of the ground, just where he intended his front hooves to land. Naturally, the horse's brain could not compute what it was that he saw, but Jeremy realised that it was a commando in full camouflaged combat gear pointing a rifle directly at him.

Both Jeremy Faversham and Bonus Magnet were fatally injured. The Olympus clean-up crew rose silently from their hiding places in the nearby bushes. They removed the cardboard commando, so familiar on the firing range back at Larcombe Manor, together with the spring mechanism that had released him at the precise moment Bonus Magnet was preparing for take-off. The crew eliminated all evidence that there had been anyone else in this part of the woods, apart from the stricken banker and his horse. Once their task was complete, they disappeared as quickly and as quietly as they had come