

CHAPTER 12



One Fear

Two days went by before I actually learned what had happened that night, because it was at supper on Friday that Aunt Millie said, 'A fox got my turkey that was nesting by the Christmas trees.'

My fork went down on my plate with a clang. I had been eating along just fine for weeks now, but after she said that I could not have swallowed if my life had depended on it. It was like my food passage had suddenly shrunk to the size of a rubber band.

'No,' I protested.

Aunt Millie mistook my 'No' for a cry of outrage that some animal had dared to take her turkey.

She looked at me and nodded. 'I think it got one of the hens sometime last week too.'

Uncle Fred turned his iced-tea glass up and drained the contents.

'Well?' Aunt Millie said to him. She had been very irritable with all of us for a week. The heat was unbearable and with each passing day, as the ground got drier and the sun hotter, she had grown more fussy. She had been saying for days, 'I don't know what I'll do if it doesn't rain,' and now it was as if she had made up her mind, and what she had decided to do was take out all her ill feelings on my fox.

'I'm not going to put up with it,' she continued. 'I mean it, Fred. Once a fox gets started, he'll clean out the whole henhouse. I have worked too hard on those hens to just stand by and watch some fox walk off with them one by one.'

'I know that, Millie.'

'Well, you are certainly acting mighty unconcerned about the whole thing,' she snapped. She pressed her napkin to her face. 'If the fox had made off with one of your precious pigs, I'd like to see what you'd do.'

'I'll take care of it,' Uncle Fred said.

'How?'

'After supper we'll go out and have a look,' he said with great patience.

I sat silent, trying to think of a plan, anything to divert them from the missing turkey. Finally I said, 'Maybe it wasn't a fox,' but Aunt Millie was already on her feet by that time saying, 'Well, let's go.'

'Now don't get in such an uproar.'

'I am not in an uproar, I am just concerned about my chickens.'

'The heat's just got you down,' Uncle Fred said.

'It is *not* the heat. Every summer you start harping on the heat.'

'All right, it is not the heat,' Uncle Fred said. 'Let's go.'

She left the dishes on the table, a thing I had never seen her do before, and the three of us walked out the back door. There was not a breeze anywhere in the yard and the leaves just hung on the trees. I had been so happy that this was the first time I had noticed how hot it really was. I felt as if my lungs were not going to be able to get enough oxygen out of this thick, hot air to keep me going.

'Turkey gone, eggs gone, cleaned out,' Aunt Millie said as we walked past the tree where the dog was tied. 'And you!' Aunt Millie pointed to the dog, who looked eagerly at us. 'You never even barked. Some watchdog you are.'

'Come on, Happ,' Uncle Fred said. He unhooked the dog, who ran ahead of us as if to make up for his laxity.

We walked down the hill to where Uncle Fred had planted some trees to be cut for Christmas trees in a few years. Now they were no more than waist-high. 'This way,' Aunt Millie said, wading through the trees as if through a choppy sea. There were some bushes to the left and we followed her to them. She parted the bushes and we looked in silence at the empty nest. Only a few black feathers remained on the ground and one inside the nest, making it seem even emptier somehow.

With one hand Aunt Millie pointed towards the orchard, then slowly to the bushes, and then to the nest, as if tracing the path of the fox. And I, as she pointed, could imagine for myself exactly how it had happened.

The black fox had come gliding like a cat through the orchard, a small dark noiseless shadow moving between the trees. She had paused in the bushes, probably right where we were standing, looked through the leaves, and seen the turkey on its nest. She had remained there a moment, still as a statue, watching the turkey, which slept with its head under its wing.

The black fox had watched a moment more – she was not an impetuous hunter – and then, suddenly,

without a sound, she had leaped to the nest. There was a silent struggle. Black wings beat the air and then drooped, and the struggle was over.

'He took the turkey,' Aunt Millie said, 'and never even cracked an egg doing it.' The ease of the thing seemed to make it even worse.

The dog was sniffing the ground and running first in one direction, then in the other.

'I don't see any eggs though,' I said.

'Sure you don't,' Aunt Millie said. 'Fox took them too.'

'Would a fox take eggs, Uncle Fred?'

He nodded. 'He'll take eggs and hide them till he wants them.'

'Where would he hide them?'

'Want to go look?' Uncle Fred said. 'Come on.'

'Well, if you two are going on an Easter-egg hunt, I'm going back and do the dishes.' She looked displeased. 'I don't know what good it'll do you to find the eggs now.' She turned and went through the little Christmas trees without looking back.

'Come on,' Uncle Fred said.

Without a word we skirted the Christmas trees and walked through the orchard.

One time my mum and dad had me sit down and make a list of all the things I was afraid of, because they thought that if I wrote all these fears down on

paper – things like being afraid of high places and being afraid of dogs – I would see how foolish my fears were.

Well, I wrote them all down and it took me two notebook pages, back and front, and I took it in and showed it to my mum and dad and they looked very surprised, because even they had not expected four whole pages of fears. I think, in all, there was a total of thirty-eight different fears. At the moment, I thought that all those thirty-eight different fears put together were not as bad as this one fear I had right now – that something terrible was going to happen to the black fox.

We crossed a field where the trees had been cut and lay across the grass waiting to be sawed and moved. Then we came to the stream and paused. Still neither of us spoke.

Slowly Uncle Fred began walking up the stream. He was so interested now that he didn't even seem to notice when his foot slipped into the water and got wet. He paused several times, then continued until we came to a place where there was a sand bar under a high bank. He looked for a moment, and then with a smile he bent down and began to scoop aside the sand with his hand.

When the hole was about six inches deep he said, 'There!' He held up a turkey egg, a large tan egg with brown speckles, and then he stepped aside and I

looked down into the hole and saw two more eggs in the sand.

'That's winter storage,' he said. 'Some old fox is planning to come back here when food's scarce and have an egg dinner.'

He put the turkey egg in my hand, and it was cold and damp. Then he said, 'It looks like you and I are going to have to do something about that fox.'

I had known all along that this was what it would come to. From the moment Aunt Millie had said a fox had gotten her turkey, I had known this would happen. Still, just the way Uncle Fred said it made me feel sick all over.

'Uncle Fred?' My mouth took this opportunity to make a five-syllable word out of his name. I thought he would look at me to see what was wrong, but he did not.

'What?' With the toe of his wet shoe he pushed the sand back into the hole.

'Maybe the fox is a hundred miles away by now.'

He shrugged. 'Tomorrow afternoon we'll go see,' he said. 'We'll take Happ and go into the woods.' He clapped me on the back with his hand – it was the first time he had ever touched me – and I could see that he was excited about going after the fox.

The turkey egg dropped from my hand, cracked on a rock, and the yolk began to stain the water.

'Let's go,' he said.

We stepped up the bank and across the fallen trees. And as we came to the orchard, my nose started to run.