



The Den

By this time we were only a hundred feet from the entrance to the fox's den. Uncle Fred had crossed the creek again and moved up towards the thicket of trees. From where he was standing, he could have thrown a rock over the trees and it would have landed in the little clearing where I had seen the baby fox play.

He walked past the thicket to a lone tree in the centre of the field and stood there for a moment. Then he knocked the creek mud on his shoe off on one of the

roots and walked back to me. He turned and walked the length of the thicket. It was like that old game Hot and Cold, where you hide something and when the person gets close to it you say, 'You're getting warmer – you're warmer – now you're hot – you're red-hot – you're on fire, you're burning up!' Inside right then I was screaming, 'You're burning up.'

'Look at that,' he said. He pointed with his gun to a pile of earth that had been banked up within the last two months. 'Sometimes when a fox makes a den she'll bring the earth out one hole, seal it up, and then use the other hole for the entrance. It'll be around here somewhere.'

He moved through the trees towards the den, walking sideways. I could not move at all. I just stood with the sun beating down on my head like a fist and my nose running.

I heard the sound of Happ's barking coming closer. He had lost the fox in the woods but now he had a new scent, older, but still hot. He came crashing through the bushes, bellowing every few feet, his head to the ground. He flashed past me, not even seeing me in his intensity, his red eyes on the ground. Like a charging bull, he entered the thicket and he and Uncle Fred stepped into the small grassy clearing at the same moment.

'Here it is,' Uncle Fred called. 'Come here.'

I wanted to turn and run. I did not want to see Uncle Fred and Happ standing in that lovely secluded clearing, but instead I walked through the trees and looked at the place I had avoided so carefully for weeks. There were the bones, some whitened by the sun, a dried turkey wing, feathers, and behind, the partially sheltered hole. Of course Uncle Fred had already seen that, and as I stepped from the trees he pointed to it with his gun.

'There's the den.'

I nodded.

'The baby foxes will be in there.'

This was the first time he had been wrong. There was only one baby fox in there, and I imagined him crouching now against the far wall of the den.

'Go back to the house and get me a shovel and sack,' Uncle Fred said.

Without speaking, I turned and walked back to the house. Behind me the black fox barked again. It was a desperate high series of barks that seemed to last a long time, and Happ lunged after the fox for the third time. It was too late now for tricks, for Uncle Fred remained, leaning on his gun waiting for the shovel and sack.

I went up the back steps and knocked. Usually I just went in the house like I did at my own home, but I waited here till Aunt Millie came and I said,

'Uncle Fred wants me to bring him a sack and a shovel.'

'Did you get the fox?'

'Uncle Fred found the den.'

'If it's in the woods, he'll find it,' she said, coming out of the door, 'but you ought to see that man try to find a pair of socks in his own drawer. Hazeline,' she called up to her window, 'you want to go see your dad dig out the baby foxes?'

'No.'

'I declare that girl is in the worst mood.' She walked with me to the shed, put the shovel in my hand, and then pressed a dusty grain sack against me. 'Now, you don't be too late.'

'I don't think it will take long.'

'Are you all right? Your face is beet red.'

'I'm all right.'

'Because I can make Hazeline take that shovel to her dad.'

'I feel fine.'

I started towards the orchard with the shovel and sack and I felt like some fairy-tale character who has been sent on an impossible mission, like proving my worth by catching a thousand golden eagles in the sack and making a silver mountain for them with my shovel. Even that did not seem as difficult as what I was really doing.

It must have taken me longer to get back than I thought, for Uncle Fred said, 'I thought you'd gotten lost.'

'No, I wasn't lost. I've been here before.'

I handed him the shovel and let the sack drop to the ground. As he began to dig, I closed my eyes and pressed my hands against my eyelids, and I saw a large golden sunburst, and in this sunburst the black fox came running towards me.

I opened my eyes and watched Uncle Fred. He dug as he did everything else – powerfully, slowly, and without stopping. His shovel hit a rock and he moved the shovel until he could bring the rock out with the dirt. At my feet the gravelly pile of earth was growing.

I turned away and looked across the creek, and I saw for the fifteenth and last time the black fox. She moved anxiously towards the bushes and there was a tension to her steps, as if she were ready to spring or make some other quick, forceful movement. She barked. She had lost the dog again, and this bark was a high clear call for Uncle Fred and me to follow her.

There was a grunt of satisfaction from Uncle Fred and I turned to see him lift out, on the shovel, covered with sand and gravel, the baby fox.

He turned it on to the sack and the baby fox lay without moving.

'He's dead,' I said.

Uncle Fred shook his head. 'He's not dead. He's just play-acting. His ma taught him to do that.'

We both looked down at the little fox without speaking. I knew that if I lived to be a hundred, I would never see anything that would make me feel any worse than the sight of that little fox pretending to be dead when his heart was beating so hard it looked like it was going to burst out of his chest.

I looked over my shoulder and the black fox was gone. I knew she was still watching us, but I could not see her. Uncle Fred was probing the den with his shovel. I said, 'I don't think there are any more. She just had one.'

He dug again, piled more earth on the pile, then said, 'You're right. Usually a fox has five or six cubs.'

'I think something happened to the others.'

He bent, folded the ends of the sack, and lifted the baby fox. I took the shovel, he the gun, and we started home, the baby fox swinging between us. Happ joined us as we crossed the creek and began to leap excitedly at the sack until Uncle Fred had to hold it shoulder-high to keep it from him.

We walked back to the house without speaking. Uncle Fred went directly to some old rabbit hutches beside the garage. Bubba had once raised rabbits here, but now the cages were empty. Uncle Fred opened

one, shook the baby fox out of the sack, and then closed the wire door.

The baby fox moved to the back of the hutch and looked at us. His fur was soft and woolly, but his eyes were sharp. Nervously he went to one corner.

Aunt Millie came out and looked. 'Just like a baby lamb,' she said. 'It's a sweet little thing, isn't it?'

'That's not the way you were talking yesterday,' Uncle Fred said.

'Well, I'm not going to have anything after my chickens,' she said. 'Not *anything*! I'd be after *you* with the broom if you bothered my chickens.' They laughed. Her spirits seemed greatly improved now that the fox was doomed, and she called, 'Hazeline, come on out here and look at this cute little baby fox.'

'No.'

Uncle Fred went into the shed, returned, and snapped a lock over the cage latch.

'You think somebody's going to steal your fox?' Aunt Millie laughed.

'I wouldn't put it past a fox to open up an unlocked cage to get her baby.'

Aunt Millie shook her head in amazement, then said, 'Well, you men have got to get washed for supper.'

We went into the house and I said to Uncle Fred, 'What are you going to do with the baby fox?'

'That's my bait. Every hunter alive's got some way to get a fox. They got some special trap or something. Mr Baynes down at the store makes up a special mixture that he says foxes can't resist. My way is to set up a trap, using the baby fox for bait. I'll sit out on the back porch tonight and watch for her.'

'Oh.'

'It never fails. That is one bait a fox can't resist.'