



Captured

'Are you getting sick?' Aunt Millie asked at supper that night.

'I guess I'm a little tired.'

'Well, I should think so! Helping with the pump out in the boiling sun all morning and then tracking that fox all afternoon. It's a wonder you don't have heat stroke. You eat something though, hear? You have to keep up your strength.'

'I'm just not hungry.'

'It's the heat. But, listen, you drink your tea. You *will*

have heat stroke sure enough if you let your body get dried out.'

I finished my tea and went up to my room. I did not even look out the window, because I knew I could see the rabbit hutch by the garage and I never wanted to see that baby fox cowering against the wall.

Hazeline came out of her room and looked in at me on the bed. 'You feeling better?'

I nodded. She was all dressed up now in a blue dress she made for 4-H. Her face looked good, as if letting it get swollen had been beneficial. I knew she was going downstairs to sit on the porch and wait for Mikey. I knew he would come, too. One time Petie and I had had the worst argument in the world. We were just sitting on the steps one afternoon and Petie had been thinking in silence for a while and then he said, 'I wonder what I'll look like when I'm grown.'

And I said, 'Porky Pig.' I don't know why I said that, because I wasn't mad at him or anything. And he said, 'Well, that's better than looking like Daffy Duck.' And I said, 'Meaning I look like Daffy Duck?' And he said, 'Yes, around the mouth.' And then we both got angry and started screaming things and I thought our friendship was over, only two days later it was just like it had never happened.

'Mikey will come over,' I said.

'Who cares? I don't care if I never see him again,' she

said, twisting her fingers in her pearls. He had given her those when she had graduated from high school two months ago.

'I know, but I bet he comes anyway.'

'Well, I can't stop him of course. It's a free country.'

'Hazeline?'

'What?'

'You know that fox I was telling you about? The black one?'

'Sure.'

'Well, your dad has her baby out in the rabbit hutch and he's going to shoot her.'

'I know it. I heard. But, listen, don't let it upset you, hear?'

'Hazeline, I don't want anything to happen to that fox.'

'Tommy, listen, all wild animals die in some violent way. It's their life. Wild animals just don't die of old age. They get killed by an enemy or by the weather or they have an accident or they get rabies or some other disease or they get shot. That's the way nature is.'

'I know that,' I said quickly, because I did not want to hear any more.

'You just forget the fox. Tomorrow maybe we can go to the picture show in Clinton or something.'

'All right.'

She went down the steps then and out on to the porch, and I could hear the swing begin to creak.

I got up and went down the steps and walked to the tree in front of the rabbit hutch. I could not explain why I did this. I didn't want to see the baby fox again, and yet here I was.

He did not see me. He was busy biting the wires of his cage with great fury and determination. I could hear the clicking of his sharp tiny teeth against the wire, but he was making no progress. Then he stopped. He still had not seen me, but he had heard or smelled something and he raised his head and let out a short cry. He waited, then after a moment he began biting the wires again.

I remained by the tree watching him, listening for the quavering cry that he uttered from time to time.

'Don't get your fingers in the cage,' Uncle Fred warned behind me. 'He may not be able to cut wire yet, but he sure could hurt a finger.'

'All right.'

'In a bit, when it starts getting dark, you can sit up here with me and watch for the fox.'

A car came slowly up the drive, and I said to Uncle Fred, 'It's Mikey.'

Behind him in the doorway Aunt Millie said, 'Did you say it's Mikey, Tom?'

I nodded.

'Praise be.'

I walked around the front of the house and stood there for a minute. Mikey had not gotten out of the car but was sitting with one arm out the window, looking at Hazeline on the porch.

'What you doing?' he asked.

'Not much of anything,' she said. 'Just fighting the heat.'

'You don't look hot – you look real good and cool.'

'Sometimes looks are deceiving.'

He ran his fingers over the steering wheel. There was a pause, then he said, 'Do you want to ride up to the lake?'

'I don't know.'

'When you going to make up your mind?'

'I just don't know whether I feel like looking at boats racing all over creation tonight.'

'Do you want to go for a ride?'

'I don't know.'

'I'll give you' – he looked at his watch – 'one minute to make up your mind.'

He started watching the seconds tick off, and I held up my watch too and counted, and only eleven seconds had gone by when Hazeline got up and said, 'I'll go,' and started laughing. 'Tell Mom I'm going off with Mikey,' she said over her shoulder and got in the car.

I went into the kitchen where Aunt Millie was standing in front of the electric fan and said, 'Hazeline has gone off with Mikey.'

I heard the cry of the baby fox again, and I thought I would be hearing that sound for ever. One time Petie Burkis fell down and broke his leg on the school playground and he said, 'Oh!' in this real terrible, painful way, and I never could forget it. Later I tried to make him say it again that same way, and one whole afternoon Petie did nothing but say the word *Oh* over and over – a thousand times maybe, and in all those thousand tries, he never sounded that same way again. I still remember it though, exactly, like I will always remember the way that baby fox sounded when he cried.

It seemed to get dark quickly that night. Uncle Fred was already out on the back porch. He had brought out a chair and was sitting with his gun beside him, pointing to the floor. I never saw anyone sit any quieter. You wouldn't have noticed him at all he was so still.

I stood behind him inside the screen door. Through the screen I could see the tiny fox lift his black nose and cry again. Now, for the first time, there was an answer – the bark of his mother.

I looked towards the garden, because that's where the sound had come from, but Uncle Fred did not even

turn his head. In a frenzy now that he had heard his mother, the baby fox moved about the cage, pulling at the wire and crying again and again.

Just then there was the sound of thunder from the west, a long rolling sound, and Aunt Millie came to the door beside me and said, 'Bless me, is that thunder?' She looked out at the sky. 'Was that thunder, Fred?'

'Could be,' he said without moving.

'Look!' Aunt Millie said, 'I swear I see black clouds. You see, Tom?'

'Yes'm.'

'And feel that breeze. Honestly, when you think you have reached absolutely the end of your endurance, then the breeze comes. I could not have drawn one more breath of hot air, and now we are going to have a storm.'

We stood in the doorway, feeling the breeze, forgetting for a moment the baby fox.

Then I saw Uncle Fred's gun rise ever so slightly in the direction of the fence behind the garage. I could not see any sign of the fox, but I knew that she must be there. Uncle Fred would not be wrong.

The breeze quickened, and abruptly the dishpan which Aunt Millie had left on the porch railing clattered to the floor. For the first time Uncle Fred turned his head and looked in annoyance at the pan and then at Aunt Millie.

'Did it scare your fox off?' she asked.

He nodded, then shifted in the chair and said, 'She'll be back.'

In just this short time the sky to the west had gotten black as ink. Low on the horizon forks of lightning streaked the sky.

'Now, Fred, don't you sit out here while it's thundering and lightning. I mean it. No fox is worth getting struck by lightning for.'

He nodded and she turned to me and said, 'You come on and help me shut the windows. Some of those upstairs are stuck wide open. Just hit them with the heel of your hand on the side till you can get them down.'

I started up the stairs and she said again, 'Fred, come on in when it starts storming. That fox'll be back tomorrow night too.'

I went upstairs and started hitting the sides of the windows. I had just gotten one window to jerk down about two inches when I heard the gunshot. I had never heard any worse sound in my life. It was a very final sound, like the most enormous period in the world. Bam. Period. The end.

I ran out of my room and down the steps so fast I could not even tell you how many times my feet touched the stairs, none maybe. I went out the back door, opening it so fast I hit the back of Uncle Fred's

chair. I looked towards the rabbit hutch, said, 'Where?' then looked at the back fence. Then I looked down at Uncle Fred, who was doing something with his gun.

'Missed,' he said.

Suddenly I felt weak. My legs were like two pieces of rope, like that trick that Hindu magicians do when they make rope come straight up out of a basket and then say a magic word and make the rope collapse. My legs felt like they were going to collapse at any second. I managed to force these two pieces of rope to carry me up the stairs and into the room.

I closed two windows, and the third one, in sympathy perhaps, just banged down all by itself. Then I sank to the bed.