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The end of the year was approaching and it would soon be Christmas, the first one that the Jones family would be spending at Greengrove Farm. Jenny and Michael had only one more week of school before the holiday break-up; and, as proper lessons had finished, all of the children were making special Christmas cards for their friends and families. "That's a good one," said Michael, looking at the card his sister was adding the finishing touches to, "Who's it for?"

"Miss Dingley," replied Jenny.

Michael was surprised. "What, you mean old Miss Dingbat next door to us?"

Jenny made a disapproving face at him. "You shouldn't call her that. It's rude and mean."

"Everyone does," chanted her brother. "They say she's crazy and screams at anyone who comes near her house, even the postman. She'll do the same to you if you try putting your card in her mail box."

"I was going to give it to her myself," explained Jenny.

"Well, good luck with that," said Michael, laughing, "You're braver than me."

That afternoon, they were on their way home and passing Miss Dingley's house. Jenny paused by the front gate. "You aren't really going to do it, are you?" asked Michael, "Why don't you just put it in the mail box?"

His sister frowned at him. "Because it's Christmas, and we should be kind to people. Miss Dingley never seems to have any visitors, so she must be quite lonely. Maybe we should invite her over for Christmas lunch."

"She wouldn't accept," said her brother, "And even if she did, I can imagine what a miserable lunch it would be for everyone." Before he'd finished speaking, Jenny was opening the gate and was about to walk towards the front door.

A net curtain in the window beside the door moved. It seemed that Miss Dingley had been watching the two children at her gate. Another few seconds and the door opened. The old lady stood glaring as Jenny approached. "What do you want?" she grated, then frowned as the girl came even closer and held out an envelope. "Whatever that is, I don't want it," snapped Miss Dingley.

"It's just a Christmas card I made for you at school," Jenny explained.

"Are you deaf?" Miss Dingley growled. "I told you I didn't want it; and I don't do Christmas. Get off my property, and take your card with you!"

Despite being upset that Miss Dingley refused the Christmas card, Jenny soon cheered up once she and her brother arrived home. Skip their old dog was waiting at the end of the driveway for them, but there was no sign of their other pet Jeffrey. Then, as they were walking

along the drive they saw him on the far side of the yard. "Oh, look," said Jenny. "There he is minding the chicks."

To a stranger this might have seemed very odd, because Jeffrey was a fox; and everyone knows that foxes eat chickens; but never Jeffrey. Not only didn't he eat chickens, he didn't like any kind of meat at all. He much preferred fruit and vegetables; and he was very partial to a cheese sandwich. There was something else that made him different to ordinary foxes. Ever since he had become a member of the family at Greengrove Farm he had taken on the job of looking after the baby chicks. His job, as he saw it, was to make sure they stayed safe and didn't stray too far from their mothers; and at the end of the day when it was their bedtime, he would guide them towards the hen house. Once all the chickens and their babies were inside, Skip would push the door closed and Jeffrey would sit in front of it on guard until Fred Jones the farmer came over to lock the door properly.

Another part of the daily routine happened later. Just before the humans had their tea, Jenny's and Michael's mother, Marion Jones, would bring out two metal bowls and set them down on the back veranda. These were for Skip and Jeffrey, and it might have been expected that the two animals would be eager to begin eating. Instead of racing onto the veranda, however, they always sat close by with heads in the air waiting for a particular sound. This would come from Miss Dingley's place next door. Apparently, the old lady's dog Blue also had a metal bowl; and presumably her veranda had a concrete floor like the one at Greengrove Farm. The children knew this, even though they had never been close enough to see, because when Blue started to eat his tea, his bowl would make a metallic jangling noise as it rattled around while he was eating. True to form, the ears of the dog and the fox pricked up at the sound of a jangling bowl echoing from the house next door; and on hearing it the two pets raced onto their own veranda to have their tea.

Over the coming days preparations were being made for Christmas. There was the Christmas tree, of course, and decorations were put up inside the house. Jenny was still concerned about Miss Dingley having a lonely Christmas, so before the children left for their final day of school, she decided to put some tinsel on the fence dividing the two properties. "If she sees you she'll yell at you," warned Michael; but despite this his sister did it anyway. Satisfied that at least the fence looked more Christmassy, Jenny had one last thing to do. As they were passing Miss Dingley's front gate, she slipped the card she'd made into the mailbox. "Wait for it," said Michael, and he watched the front window for the curtain to move. When it didn't, he commented: "You were lucky to get away with that, Jen. Miss Dingbat must be out the back."

On their way home that afternoon, Jenny took a peek in Miss Dingley's mailbox and was disappointed to discover that the Christmas card was still in there. "She told you she didn't want it," chuckled Michael. "I bet she's ripped your decorations off the fence, too." As it happened, the tinsel was still twined around the top fence wire. "Miracles will never cease," he said, looking towards Miss Dingley's house; but there was no sign of the old lady. "Funny," he added, "I don't see Blue either."

"Do you think she's alright?" asked his sister.

"Oh, I expect so," he replied. "As long as she's got something to growl about she'll be fine. Come on. Let's go and get changed."

Later that day the usual routine was followed. With Jeffrey nudging the chicks towards the hen house all seemed normal. Then it clearly wasn't. The two pets were waiting patiently by the veranda for the sound of Blue jangling his bowl around; and they waited and waited. "That's odd," said Marion. "Miss Dingley wouldn't let Blue go without his tea."

"And she hasn't put her chooks away," said Fred. "She always does it about the same time as Jeffrey does ours." This reminded Jenny of the business with the Christmas card; so she told her parents about it and how she was concerned that something might have happened to Miss Dingley. Fred Jones turned to take a long look at the old lady's yard. Just as he did, he saw

Jeffrey climbing through the fence and start heading for the house. "Oh, no," he groaned; then shouted: "Jeffrey, get back here!" The fox took no notice and continued on, even jumping up on the veranda and padding right up to the back door. They all watched, puzzling what Jeffrey was doing standing motionless by the door. He was there less than a minute before he was racing back. What he did next was most peculiar as he performed a series of twists and turns, finally grabbing hold of Fred's trouser leg and tugging him towards the fence. If the humans failed to understand what Jeffrey was trying to tell them, old Skip was in no doubt. He began barking, then set about racing to the fence line before running back and doing it all over again.

"Something's wrong, Fred," said his wife.

"Jeffrey knows there is," put in Jenny. "That's what he was doing at Miss Dingley's back door. Blue must be still inside and he was talking to him. We have to go and check on her."

"Jenny's right," said Marion.

"Okay," Fred agreed. "You all stay here. I'm going to climb over the fence." The two pets went with him, but Skip was too big to get through the fence, so he could only sit and watch. Aware of the fox on his heels, Fred pointed across the yard to where the chicks and chickens were still grubbing around in the dirt. "Put them away, Jeffrey," he commanded. "I'm going to try the back door. I only hope it isn't locked."

As it happened, the door opened without a problem. Fred's concern then was for Blue and whether the dog would let him enter. He did bark, but it wasn't threatening. This bark was more like the one Skip had used to tell them something was wrong. Blue kept doing it, in between hurrying towards a doorway, then coming back and repeating his doggy message. Fred followed Blue into the kitchen to find Miss Dingley lying on the floor moaning. The man gasped. "What happened, Miss Dingley?"

"I slipped and fell," said the old lady in a feeble whisper. "I think my leg's broken; maybe my arm too."

"Just stay still," Fred advised. "I'll call for an ambulance. Where's your phone?"

"I don't have one," replied Miss Dingley.

The man's eyes flew wide and he paused to think for a second or two; then he was rushing through the house and out of the back door. Once in the yard, he shouted to his family who were now at the fence. "Phone for an ambulance, Marion! Miss Dingley's had a fall."

"I told you something wasn't right," Jenny chided her brother; and with that she started to climb over the fence. Despite her brother advising against it, the girl carried on. "You stay here if you like. I'm going to be with Miss Dingley." The next moment she was off and running.

There was little the Jones family could do aside from keeping out of the way so that the medical crew could see to Miss Dingley. They were putting her into the ambulance when she had them wait. She needed to talk to farmer Jones: "What's going to happen to my place while I'm in hospital?"

"Don't you worry, Miss Dingley," said Jenny. "We'll take care of everything. Dad can do the heavy stuff, while me and Michael can take care of the garden and make sure the sheep have water."

"But there are the chooks as well," the old lady said.

"Jeffrey can sort them," said Michael. "He's already put them in the hen house."

"Jeffrey?" queried Miss Dingley. "Who's Jeffrey?"

Fred Jones gave a small, embarrassed cough. "Actually, Jeffrey's our fox." He saw a look of horror creep over the old lady's face. "But he's not like any fox you've ever seen."

"He doesn't eat chickens," added Jenny. "In fact, he doesn't like meat of any kind. He prefers fruit and vegies; and he really loves cheese sandwiches."

Miss Dingley frowned. "I've never heard of such nonsense. – a fox eating cheese sandwiches...?"

"It's true, Miss Dingley," Michael assured her. "I'm sure he would have been very pleased to meet you; but he's busy at the moment guarding your chooks."

"Guarding them...!" she returned in disbelief. Then the ambulance doors were closing and she could say no more.

Miss Dingley was in hospital for a while and didn't return home until two days before Christmas Eve. The Jones family was there to greet her, along with her dog Blue who was so excited that he kept trying to jump up and had to be held back. The old lady had both her leg and arm plastered and had to be in a wheelchair. Even though she had barely been in her home for less than five minutes, she demanded that she be wheeled out the back to take a look at her yard. "We've tried to keep it nice for you," said Jenny.

"Hmm," grumbled the old lady, casting a critical eye around. "Are my chooks still alive?" A movement to one side caught her attention and she turned to see Jeffrey approaching herding a bunch of chicks towards her. She frowned. "I can hardly believe my own eyes. He can't be a fox, surely? – he just looks like one."

"We couldn't believe it at first," explained Marion Jones, "But the proof is here for all to see." Jeffrey left the chicks momentarily and came to sit beside Miss Dingley. "I think he wants a pat."

"What?" spluttered the old lady. "*Me* pat a fox? It will likely bite my hand off!"

"Not Jeffrey," said the Jones family in unison.

That Christmas came and went. Because of her physical disabilities, Miss Dingley accepted help from her next door neighbours, grudgingly at first; but as the days wore on, she got used to the idea. That she was grateful wasn't in doubt. This was made clear during Christmas lunch which the old lady attended. "I haven't bought you all presents," she said, putting on a fake scowl. "That's not what I do; but," she continued, "There is someone who really deserves a special gift." Reaching under the cover over her knees, she brought out a small box wrapped in Christmas paper. "This is for you, Jeffrey," she said, holding out the present. "A little something to thank you for doing such a magnificent job looking after my chooks." Jeffrey came over, sniffed at it and started to become very excited. Miss Dingley smiled. "You know what it is, don't you; but maybe not quite; not yet anyway.

Jeffrey waited eagerly for Jenny to open his present. They all laughed at what was in the box – an apple, a pear, a stick of celery and a sandwich. "I thought Jeffrey deserved a real Christmas treat," said old Miss Dingley with a chuckle. "It's his favourite – a cheese sandwich; but I put Vegemite on it." She turned to the others. "He does like Vegemite, doesn't he?"

Judging by the way he got stuck into it, Jeffrey did, very much so; and with this simple gesture, the grumpy old lady from next door had cemented a lasting friendship with the Jones family and their unusual, chook-minding pet.

It truly could never have been a better Christmas.