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PAX

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HARPERCOLLINS CHILDREN'S BOOKS

The fox felt the car slow before the boy did, as he felt everything first. Through the pads of his paws, along his spine, in the sensitive whiskers at his wrists. By the vibrations, he learned also that the road had grown coarser. He stretched up from his boy's lap and sniffed at threads of scent leaking in through the window, which told him they were now travelling into woodlands. The sharp odours of pine – wood, bark, cones, and needles – slivered through the air like blades, but beneath that, the fox recognised softer clover and wild garlic and ferns, and also a hundred things he had never encountered before

but that smelled green and urgent.

The boy sensed something now, too. He pulled his pet back to him and gripped his baseball glove more tightly.

The boy's anxiety surprised the fox. The few times they had travelled in the car before, the boy had been calm or even excited. The fox nudged his muzzle into the glove's webbing, although he hated the leather smell. His boy always laughed when he did this. He would close the glove around his pet's head, play-wrestling, and in this way the fox would distract him.

But today the boy lifted his pet and buried his face in the fox's white ruff, pressing hard.

It was then that the fox realised his boy was crying. He twisted round to study his face to be sure. Yes, crying – although without a sound, something the fox had never known him to do. The boy hadn't shed tears for a very long time, but the fox remembered: always before he had cried out, as if to demand that attention be paid to the curious occurrence of salty water streaming from his eyes.

The fox licked at the tears and then grew more confused. There was no scent of blood. He squirmed out of the boy's arms to inspect his human more carefully, alarmed that he could have failed to notice an injury, although his

sense of smell was never wrong. No, no blood; not even the under-skin pooling of a bruise or the marrow leak of a cracked bone, which had happened once.

The car pulled to the right, and the suitcase beside them shifted. By its scent, the fox knew it held the boy's clothing and the things from his room he handled most often: the photo he kept on top of his bureau and the items he hid in the bottom drawer. He pawed at a corner, hoping to pry the suitcase open enough for the boy's weak nose to smell these favoured things and be comforted. But just then the car slowed again, this time to a rumbling crawl. The boy slumped forward, his head in his hands.

The fox's heartbeat climbed and the brushy hairs of his tail lifted. The charred metal scent of the father's new clothing was burning his throat. He leaped to the window and scratched at it. Sometimes at home his boy would raise a similar glass wall if he did this. He always felt better when the glass wall was lifted.

Instead, the boy pulled him down on to his lap again and spoke to his father in a begging tone. The fox had learned the meaning of many human words, and he heard him use one of them now: "NO." Often the "no" word was linked to one of the two names he knew: his own and

his boy's. He listened carefully, but today it was just the "NO," pleaded to the father over and over.

The car juddered to a full stop and tilted off to the right, a cloud of dust rising beyond the window. The father reached over the seat again, and after saying something to his son in a soft voice that didn't match his hard lie-scent, he grasped the fox by the scruff of the neck.

His boy did not resist, so the fox did not resist. He hung limp and vulnerable in the man's grasp, although he was now frightened enough to nip. He would not displease his humans today. The father opened the car door and strode over gravel and patchy weeds to the edge of a wood. The boy got out and followed.

The father set the fox down, and the fox bounded out of his reach. He locked his gaze on his two humans, surprised to notice that they were nearly the same height now. The boy had grown very tall recently.

The father pointed to the woods. The boy looked at his father for a long moment, his eyes streaming again. And then he dried his face with the neck of his T-shirt and nodded. He reached into his jeans pocket and withdrew an old plastic soldier, the fox's favorite toy.

The fox came to alert, ready for the familiar game. His

boy would throw the toy, and he would track it down – a feat the boy always seemed to find remarkable. He would retrieve the toy and wait with it in his mouth until the boy found him and took it back to toss again.

And sure enough, the boy held the toy soldier aloft and then hurled it into the woods. The fox's relief – they were only here to play the game! – made him careless. He streaked toward the woods without looking back at his humans. If he had, he would have seen the boy wrench away from his father and cross his arms over his face, and he would have returned. Whatever his boy needed – protection, distraction, affection – he would have offered.

Instead, he set off after the toy. Finding it was slightly more difficult than usual, as there were so many other, fresher odours in the woods. But only slightly – after all, the scent of his boy was also on the toy. That scent he could find anywhere.

The toy soldier lay face down at the burled root of a butternut tree, as if he had pitched himself there in despair. His rifle, its butt pressed tirelessly against his face, was buried to the hilt in leaf litter. The fox nudged the toy free, took it between his teeth, and rose on his haunches to allow his boy to find him.

In the still woods, the only movements were bars of sunlight glinting like green glass through the leafy canopy. He stretched higher. There was no sign of his boy. A prickle of worry shivered up the fox's spine. He dropped the toy and barked. There was no response. He barked again, and again was answered by only silence. If this was a new game, he did not like it.

He picked up the toy soldier and began to retrace his trail. As he loped out of the woods, a jay streaked in above him, shrieking. The fox froze, torn.

His boy was waiting to play the game. But birds! Hours upon hours he had watched birds from his pen, quivering at the sight of them slicing the sky as recklessly as the lightning he often saw on summer evenings. The freedom of their flights always mesmerised him.

The jay called again, deeper in the forest now, but answered by a chorus of reply. For one more moment the fox hesitated, peering into the trees for another sight of the electric-blue wedge.

And then, behind him, he heard a car door slam shut, and then another. He bounded at full speed, heedless of the briars that tore at his cheeks. The car's engine roared to life, and the fox skidded to a stop at the edge of the road.

His boy rolled the window down and reached his arms out. And as the car sped away in a pelting spray of gravel, the father cried out the boy's name, *"Peter!"* And the boy cried out the only other name the fox knew.

"Pax!"

"*So there were lots of them.*"

Peter heard how stupid it sounded, but he couldn't help repeating it. "Lots." He plowed his fingers through the heap of plastic soldiers in the battered cookie tin – identical except for their poses: standing, kneeling, and prone, all with rifles pressed hard to their olive-green cheeks. "I always thought he just had the one."

"No. I was always stepping on them. He must have had hundreds. A whole army of them." The grandfather laughed at his own accidental joke, but Peter didn't. He turned his head and looked intently out the window, as

if he had just caught sight of something in the darkening back yard. He raised a hand to draw his knuckles up his jaw line, exactly the way his father rasped his beard stubble, and wiped surreptitiously at the tears that had brimmed. What kind of a baby cried about something like this?

And why was he crying at all, anyway? He was twelve and he hadn't cried for years, not even when he'd fractured his thumb bare-handing Josh Hourihan's pop fly. That had hurt a lot, but he'd only cursed through the pain waiting with the coach for X-rays. Man up. But today, *twice*.

Peter lifted a soldier from the tin and drifted back to the day he'd found one just like it in his father's desk. "What's this?" he'd asked, holding it up.

Peter's father had reached over and taken it, his face softening. "Huh. Been a long time. That was my favourite toy when I was a kid."

"Can I have it?"

His dad had tossed the soldier back. "Sure."

Peter had stood it up on the windowsill beside his bed, pointing the little plastic rifle out in a satisfying show of defence. But within the hour Pax had swiped it, which made Peter laugh – just like him, Pax had to have it.

Peter dropped the toy back into the tin and was about

to snap the lid back on when he noticed the edge of a yellowed photo sticking up from the mound of soldiers.

He tugged it free. His dad, at maybe ten or eleven, with one arm draped around a dog. Looked like part-collie, part-a-hundred-other-things. Looked like a good dog, the kind you would tell your own son about. "I never knew Dad had a dog," he said, passing the photo to his grandfather.

"That's Duke. Dumbest creature ever born, always underfoot." The old man looked more closely at the picture, and then over at Peter as if seeing something for the first time. "You've got the same black hair as your dad." He rubbed at the fringe of grey fuzz banding the top of his head. "I had it too, way back. And look, he was scrawny then, too, same as you, same as me, with those ears like a jug. The men in our family – I guess our apples don't fall far from the tree, eh?"

"No, sir." Peter forced a small smile, but it didn't hold up. "Underfoot." That was the word Peter's father had

used. "He can't have that fox underfoot. He doesn't move as fast as he used to. You stay out of the way, too. He's not used to having a kid around."

"You know, war came and I went and served, like my father. Like your father now. Duty calls, and we answer in this family. No, sir, our apples don't fall far from the tree." He handed back the photo. "Your father and that dog. They were inseparable. I'd almost forgotten."

Peter put the photo back into the tin and pressed the lid down tight, then slid it under the bed, where he'd found it. He looked out the window again. He couldn't risk talking about pets right now. He didn't want to hear about duty. And he sure didn't want to hear any more about apples and the trees they were stuck underneath. "What time does school start here?" he asked, not turning round.

"Eight. They said to show up early, introduce yourself to the homeroom teacher. Mrs. Mirez, or Ramirez . . . something. I got you some supplies." The old man nodded over to a spiral notebook, a beat-up thermos, and a bunch of stubby pencils bundled together with a thick rubber band.

Peter walked over to the desk and put everything into