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SARA PENNYPACKER

PAX

JOURNEY HOME

ILLUSTRATED BY

JON KLASSEN


HARPERCOLLINS
CHILDREN'S BOOKS

Author's note:

*Fox communication is a complex system
of vocalization, gesture, scent, and expression.
The "dialogue" in italics in Pax's chapters attempts
to translate their eloquent language.*

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P^{ax} ran.

He always ran—nearly a year after he'd last been caged, his muscles still remembered the hex wire.

This morning the running was different, though. This morning the fox ran because below the hard, matted forest floor, below the crusts of snow that remained in the deepest pine-shades and below the wafers of ice lacing the puddles, he smelled it: spring. New life surging *up*—up from the bark and the buds and the burrows—and the only possible response to *up* was *go*.

And then suddenly he stopped. Rabbit.

Bristle was always hungry these days.

Pax canted toward the scent and found the warren. It had been abandoned only hours before. It held two kit carcasses, one dead many days, one lifeless a single night.

This was the third place in as many days that Pax had come upon dead young. The first, a field mouse burrow, held an entire litter. He had brought home the freshest body, but Bristle's snout wrinkled in disgust.

The second was a chipmunk nest. Bristle had refused the meal of dead pups, too, so Pax didn't bother with the rabbit kits. Instead, suddenly tired, he turned for the Deserted Farm that he, Bristle, and Runt had claimed since leaving the place where Runt had lost his leg.

Bristle wasn't in sight, but she was near. He trotted along her trail to an old shed. A hole had been tunneled under its steps, freshly scraped dirt scattered all around. Pax followed her scent inside.

Bristle was curled at the back of the new den, her bright fur clumped with sand. She opened one sleepy eye to her mate, then settled her face back onto her paws.

Pax was baffled. The morning air was already warming and held no threat of storm. Even more perplexing, there was a scent in the den he had never encountered before, but

that he knew as well as his own. It was of Bristle, but it was not Bristle.

He nosed her neck, asking her to track the air. *New?*

Yes, new. Us.

Pax still did not understand.

Bristle rolled onto her back and stretched out her round belly. *Kits. Soon.* Then she curled back into the clean sand.

Pax watched her every breath until she fell asleep.

He backed out of the den, gave a single bark.

And then he ran. This time he ran because if he didn't, he would burst.



Peter crouched over the offending floorboard and traced the ridge that rippled all the way down. Vola had said the boards were flat enough, he could begin sanding, but he wanted them perfect when she saw the floor finished, not just flat enough.

He adjusted the wheel of the plane until the blade projected only enough to shave off veneers thin as paper. He could make a single thicker cut, but layer by layer would do a better job.

Peter liked planing—maybe best of all the skills he'd learned building the cabin. The plane was a real muscle

tool, not like a screwdriver, say. You used your whole body with a plane. A tool for a man, not a boy.

He positioned it over the end of the board, wrapped his right hand over the knob and eased his weight onto it, then began to guide the plane forward with his left. The hundred-year-old yellow pine, salvaged from a neighbor's barn, sheared off in an even curl that smelled as crisp as fresh-cut wood. He liked how wood was always ready to start over, and how—

Suddenly, the plane stubbed up short against a knot. Peter's pushing hand shot off the knob and he skinned the pad of his palm.

He fell back on his heels, cursing. When was he going to learn? That was how knots were: sneaky, hiding under the surface. As the blood welled up and began to trickle down his wrist, the phrase struck: *blood and sweat*. He had dripped buckets of sweat all over this cabin. A little blood signature wouldn't be out of place. He pressed the cut to the board and watched a red flame leak out. The spreading stain looked like a fox's tail.

Peter jerked his hand back, shocked at how hard the memory hit. Last year, on his journey back to the place where he had been forced to abandon his pet fox, Pax, he'd

nicked his calf so he could smear a fox-tail blood oath on his leg. *I will come back for you*, it vowed.

He pressed the wound to the center of his chest. Memories were so treacherous. Always lurking under the surface, ready to bushwhack you with a blade to the heart when you weren't careful.

He knew what he had to do to counteract this one. Kind of a penance he'd devised, actually. Every time he slipped up like this and thought about Pax, he made himself go through the same exercise. Best to do it right away.

Peter closed his eyes. He visualized the afternoon when he'd found a dead vixen by the side of the road. He went over all his steps in detail: picking up her stiff, muddy body; carrying it away in search of a place to bury it; noticing the sandy spot beside a stone wall and scraping out a shallow grave with his boot.

Although his chest was tightening the way it always did at this part, he made himself remember finding the opening to the fox den. It hurt to breathe now, but he drew up the scene again: three dead kits and one shivering survivor.

He had reached in and lifted the live kit—a male, a little dog fox. He'd curled it snug against his chest, where it had filled a hollowness he hadn't known he was carrying.

But now, for the penance, he spliced in a different scene: the thing his dad told him he *should* have done.

"It was meant to die with the rest of its family. The right thing to do would have been to make that be painless."

Holding the kit, Peter had been outraged. "Too late," he'd cried. "And I'm keeping him!"

His father had been irritated. But in his expression—for the first time, maybe—Peter had seen respect.

Now he could see that his father had been right. He should have put Pax out of his misery, and out of the pain he himself would cause them both five years later.

He finished the penance. No reaching in. Instead, he imagined himself wresting off one of the heavy capstones from the top of the wall and dropping it over the entrance to the den. And then immediately walking away without ever looking back.

Do it. Walk away. Don't look back.

All that pain he would have avoided.

Peter ran the sequence two more times. He'd read it took three times to reprogram your brain.

The penance was working. He thought of Pax less and less. If he could avoid seeing Vola's raccoon, he could go

days without remembering he'd ever had a pet.

He got up and put the plane away. His cut had stopped bleeding, but he would avoid the tool for a while. You couldn't give memory a way in.

He took a piece of canvas off a trough in the corner. In it he had piled dried moss, woodstove ash, and clay slurry. He mixed in some more water until he'd made a rough paste. Then he troweled some into a pail and began chinking the spaces between the logs on the north wall.

While he worked, he allowed himself to admire the cabin. He'd decided to build it back in September, when he'd come home from the first day of school and spread his books over Vola's kitchen table and seen how impossible the situation was. Vola's cabin was perfect for her, but it was too small for two. They'd agreed that he needed some space and some privacy, and she'd helped him design a place to sleep and study. Just ten by twelve—room enough for a bed and bureau, a desk and chair—its simplicity appealed to him.

He had felled the logs himself, sawed each to length and notched them. He'd cut every rafter and beam, shingled the roof and tarred it. Last week, he'd found three windows and a door in a junkyard and bought them with the

money his grandfather sent each month. He would start framing them tomorrow after school.

Neighbors had helped raise the logs into place, but otherwise he'd done every job alone. Vola had guided him, of course, but she'd barely lifted a hand. That was the deal—he wanted to build something all himself—and she respected that. He liked that about her.

Just then, as if he'd called her up, he saw Vola walking down the path. She looked uncomfortable, tugging on her skirt as if she still hadn't gotten used to dressing up for her library days.

She stepped up onto the cinder block he'd placed at the doorway for her—she got around really well on her prosthetic leg, but tall steps were awkward—and knocked on a log. Another thing Peter liked was that she respected his space, too.

He spread a tarp to hide the unfinished floor and then waved her in. "How'd it go today?"

Vola smiled. "That little Williams girl is going to drive me nuts. But she's got a feel for the marionettes. Bea says hello. She ordered that new book on trees you wanted. I didn't think there was a book on trees left that you hadn't read. Oh, and I almost forgot. Someone put up a sign on

the bulletin board. Puppies. Lab and spaniel were in the mix. I was thinking . . .”

Peter’s breath went shallow. He turned away. “No.” Now Pax was in his head again. He picked up the trowel. “I have to get back to work.”

“I was just thinking maybe a little company when you start spending time out here . . .”

“No!” The sharpness of his voice surprised him.

Vola stepped back. “All right. It is too soon. I understand.”

Peter doubted that Vola did understand, since he didn’t understand himself. All he knew was that the idea of having a pet again made it hard to breathe.

She smiled a conciliatory smile.

Peter nodded and slapped a load of slurry onto the wall. He wished she would leave. He had to run the penance right away, or the memory would grow roots. He smoothed the slurry along the log.

Vola’s smile faded. “I told you yesterday, don’t seal it up so tight.”

Peter bit his cheek and spread on another thick band of chinking. “Keep out the cold.”

“You’ll keep out the air and the light.”

He stuffed the chinking deep into the gap.

“People die without light and air, boy,” Vola said in a quieter voice.

“I know,” he said without looking up. “People die from the cold, too.”



*P*ax paced.

The last week had been warm, but tonight the midnight air sparkled with frost. A full moon tugged at him, but Bristle's pull was stronger.

She'd entered the den below the shed at dusk, her belly swaying. Pax had heard her circling, trying to settle, then digging at the floor, then circling again. He had poked his snout in once when he heard her panting with effort, but she'd growled at him. *Do not enter. But stay near.*

Since then he'd patrolled the ground around the shed and the broad saucer of meadow, greening with new shoots,

in front of it. For hours, he'd encountered no intruders, but now he heard the approach of a familiar gait.

Bristle's brother moved with an odd three-footed roll after losing a hind leg the spring before. But he'd become a fine hunter—his eyes and ears seemed to have sharpened to compensate for the loss of quickness—and now he emerged from the brush with a fat quail in his jaws, which he dropped at the den entrance.

Runt's ears pricked toward the rustling inside.

Before Pax could warn him, he ducked in. Pax heard a hiss, and a few seconds later, Runt stumbled out backward, whimpering. He slunk off to flop down at the base of an oak a safe distance away.

Pax followed and lay down beside Runt. Runt curled his tail over his snout and closed his eyes, but Pax stayed alert, gaze trained on the den. He would not try to enter until Bristle invited him—he had encountered her sharp teeth before—but he felt a need to protect her tonight.

As dawn began to lighten the sky, a blood scent drifted over.

Pax flew to the den.

A wet heat rose into the cold air. The blood it carried was not from a wound, not from death. This was life blood,