



*P*<sup>ax</sup> 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.