

1



My paws slipped on dry earth. I kicked up shrouds of dust as I hurtled toward the fence. Swerving to avoid it, I righted myself and dived under the splintering dead wood. My pursuer was gaining on me as I grasped for the wildway, the tangle of greenery on the other side. I caught the rich aroma of hazel and cedar, the quiet and peace of the world beyond the web of grass.

His shrill cry shattered the silence.

With a surge of panic, I squeezed beneath the fence. Clods of soil clasped at my belly, tugging me back. My heart thundered in my ears. For an instant the dead wood enclosed me, pinning me to the earth. The grass mocked me, tickling my whiskers.

With a desperate shake I was free, lost in the green maze of the wildway.

Stooping snowdrops bobbed on their stems, snaps of white light.

I held my breath.

A pointed snout poked under the fence, stabbing the air. The fox's amber eyes caught mine, the black slits narrowed. Fear murmured at the back of my neck. I calmed myself; I was safe: he was too large to shuffle beneath the fence. He smacked against it with a growl, his slender black foreleg reaching through the gap, his claws grazing the earth by my paw.

I reared back, keeping my eyes on the fence. He couldn't go any further. He knew it too; he drew himself away, his leg disappearing behind the fence. I could hear him pacing. Flashes of his mottled red coat were visible each time he passed the gap. Then he disappeared from view and grew quiet. I was quiet too, inhaling the air.

I sensed the fox. The shape of his body. The silver-and-gold dappled brush of his tail. I pictured the color in the eye of my mind and felt the bristles of his tail hairs as though I was touching them. For an instant, I saw the far side of the fence and tasted the frustration that tingled on his tongue.

I knew this fox like my shadow.

My ear rotated. A bird was cawing in a nearby tree. It was large, its feathers glossy black, and it paused when it spotted me. It dipped its beak, stepping nervously from foot

to foot. Then it arched its shimmering wings as though summoning storm clouds. With an angry caw it rose in the sky.

Wood shrieked and I spun round, my heart lunging against my chest. He had thrown himself at the gap! He burst through in a shower of wood chips. My stomach clenched and I bolted, plunging through the grass. I threw a look over my shoulder and saw him, for an instant, as he hunkered down to the ground.

In a flicker the fox vanished before my eyes.

The air in his wake had a gossamer sheen, like light bent through the wings of bees. The earth was a blur of grass and soil.

I knew his tricks and blinked furiously, catching a flash of his pelt. I rounded a tree stump in a flurry of grass. When I glanced back again he was in plain sight, his fur a blaze of red as he vaulted the stump. His breath was at the tip of my brush.

But I had a trick of my own.

I threw open my jaws and cawed like the bird with the shimmering feathers. I cast my voice to the twisted tails of the grass stems, to the fence, and the earth, and the clouds that gathered at the edges of the sky, mimicking the creature as best I could.

I zigzagged through grass that snaked around my paws, pulling and beckoning, slowing me down. I gave it up: the cawing—it wouldn't fool anyone.