

## **Chapter 5, February 2nd**

Adrian Williams

He sits now in fear, awake after months of cold sleep. The type of dreamless sleep that is so still your body aches. His legs have been precariously curled around his head and, now as he stretches them out in his small dry bed, he finds himself satisfied with the sound of his cold bones cracking against one another. It had been the type of sleep that cannot be fought. Annually he indulged and fattened himself up to a point of gross, decadent uselessness. This was a state he quite enjoyed, a pure and senseless inundation of succulent nurturing morsels. He did this every year before his long sleep and woke up, each year, thin. Too thin; a frustrated, weak, and equally useless thin.

He can't work like this. He has a den to keep, a burrow to be more specific. The burrow needs to be maintained, cleaned, and enlarged. Some entryways will be closed to make way for new ones. All the pathways are to be cleared of new roots and fallen soil. There is always much to do after a long winter. But not in this condition. After all, he has just woken up and is gathering his bearings before rushing into things.

He lies there and wonders if anything awaits him outside that hole? Will there be fresh grain, snails, grasses, or women? Will there be any new growth? Or has he woken up too early? It was never easy to get this right. There is a delicate balance between too early and too late. Too early is being awake in the end of winter when you might be picking at the plants which you already flossed your teeth with the previous year. And too late is coming when the other groundhogs have beat you to the punch. If you come too late, there is plenty of food, sure, but you miss the chance to mate. The pregnant girls fight you off like a disease. The same girls that might have loved you last year act like you don't even exist if they have already mated. He doesn't want to come too late and understands the advantages of finding his way out of his burrow at just the right time.

He considers just rushing out and looking for whatever food might

be left over from last year. But, not having checked yet, he shouldn't only think about the possibilities of a dismal winter's end. Maybe spring has arrived; maybe he is already too late? Inside the hole, there is no way to tell winter from spring, it's dark, quiet, and peaceful all the time; pretty comfortable, actually. He did enjoy his time in the burrow; and not just because he invested so much energy in its upkeep, but because it is the only place, where he feels safe, warm, dry, and completely sheltered from all the worries that could crop up outside. Sheltered from all the worries, that is, except the concern involved with his potential need—at some point—to exit his burrow and find himself a bite to eat. The burrow would be absolutely perfect, if it weren't for his immense hunger. Still a little cold and weak from his long sleep, he isn't prepared to make any decisions. So he lies there snuggled in his indecision, in his warm fur coat, which has grown much too big for him. If he is already too late, a few more minutes aren't going to make much difference.

Two years prior, he had woken up too early. It was the first time he had woken up this way, perhaps as a result of his undeniable desire to be punctual. His internal alarm clock had more in store for him than he ever bargained for. When he exited his burrow, there wasn't a creature in sight, not one other groundhog to be seen. He scurried around the brush digging at the roots of plants in search of something green. His energy was low and after a day of search—and a mind trapped open, sleepless—he was so lethargic that he could do absolutely nothing about it. After a few days of wallowing about foraging unsuccessfully, he saw that he was not the only one early to rise. Not far from him, just down the hill, a few field mice were scrounging around the forest floor also in search of whatever might be edible. He knew mice. He even had mice friends. They were much smaller than he, also weak from their winter's sleep. He was conversing with one of them when the thought crossed his mind. He had never eaten another mammal before, but talking to this sweet little mouse was starting to make him a little nervous. She asked him if she could warm herself up in his fur for a few minutes as the wind was quite cutting that day. She snuggled her sweet little mouse body

up against his and wrapped his sagging fur around her like a mink coat. He stood, hungry, and held her little body between his paws. She was so small, he thought, no one would miss her, if I just took her back to my den... His brain was spinning. Why hadn't he come up with it sooner? Of course, foxes and coyotes wouldn't have given it a second thought and as this mouse didn't fear him, he already had an advantage. Morals were not in question here. This was a matter of survival. The little mouse pet his soft fur and complimented him on its luxurious appearance. Her head was about two centimeters in diameter, but she was thin. Mice also went about fattening themselves up before a long sleep and she had woken up in such a state as he. Thin. Was there any nutritional value in such a mouse? He pet her fine head and pinched at her waist to check her figure. She squeaked in shock. She told him to stop, it hurt. He did. They stood there for a while, until she remembered why she had left her den, she was hungry. Pulling herself from his grasp, she thanked him for the moment of warmth and told him she was to be on her way. He could see himself growing thinner. This was his chance. He could invite her to his place if he told her he had some grain stored up, maybe she would believe him and follow him there. Then, she would be his. He could rest in peace on a full stomach. Now, a few paces from him, he yelled out after her that he had a few pieces of grain stored. If she would like to pick them up, she would only have to accompany him to his place. She found this to be quite peculiar. If he had grain in his burrow, then what was he doing out here all alone in the cold. He told her he was just up for some fresh air and a walk. The mouse grew suspicious. She knew groundhogs were harmless, nonetheless, she wasn't sure about this one. She thought better than to follow him back to his burrow, bid him farewell, and quickly scampered off in further search of food. The groundhog was devastated, alone; hungry and alone. Had he invited that mouse back to his den so that he could eat her? He knew he hadn't any grain saved up, he had outright lied. Had she actually come, would he have been able to kill her? Was he capable of such a thing? Usually, he was a vegetarian, with the exception of a snail or slug on really special occasions. He tried to

imagine what she might have tasted like, her thin coat of gray fur and her little pink footpads, soft and smooth from her winter's rest. He could have had her, he could have taken her home, hit her on the head. It would have been so fast that she wouldn't have felt a thing, he could have eaten her while she was still warm. He was a little ashamed, but proud, of his ability to think like a carnivore. Exhausted by his horrid consideration and everlasting hunger, he was able to beat his insomnia and finally retreated to his little hole in the ground, only to wake up six weeks later, much too late to mate. It had been a terrible year, a year that was not to be repeated.

Lying there considering what might await him outside the burrow, another thought crosses his mind. If he is up too early, if he goes out looking for food, if that food is further than a sprint away, there is a chance that a fox or a mountain lion might see him. If he is the first groundhog of the season, he could be the first offer as well. It is too dangerous. He considers now the possibility of waiting a few days before checking on the status of food. But his stomach rumbles and that whole waiting idea flies right out the window. The groundhog is accustomed to this question, so, like every year, he begins to reason with himself.

What are the facts? The temperature has risen, as it was necessary for his waking. There is no telling how much it has risen, or how long this will hold, but that it has risen he is sure of. He knows that high- and low-pressure systems follow one another. Coming and going in increments of around three to four weeks. If he is in a low-pressure system now, which might bring on clouds and gray days, it will be followed by a nice high-pressure system coming late enough that when followed again by a low, would be too late to freeze. Providing him, therefore, with an early spring. This low-pressure system, which would put him now in gray weather, is what he is hoping for. But, if he steps out of his burrow to find a great black shadow at his feet and an enormous blue sky, he knows that would mean that a high-pressure system had come and would go early enough to expect another freeze when the next system would come through.

Still unsure if he should decide anything at all, knowing all the

dangers that might await him, he begins to scratch his fur and bathe himself. After all, if he has come at the right time, there will be women waiting for him, and if it's too early, there is no harm in being clean before going back to sleep. Unable to stand entirely upright in his home, he crouches and wriggles himself around to loosen his muscles.

He has not yet attempted to open his eyes and can feel that a soft, salty crust has sealed them shut. He scratches at his eye sockets to break away the dry film. They water immediately upon opening but it feels good. After freeing his eyes, still in darkness, he begins to lick himself clean. While he bathes something begins to trouble him. Although he is trying to forget the possibility of being eaten by a fox, he can't keep his mind from wandering back to that potential circumstance. Of course, he reminds himself that a fox could eat him just as easily in late spring as in late winter. He knows the chances are greater when less groundhog is out. How horrible it would be to be eaten by a fox. He had witnessed others being dragged off. Half-alive, screaming, clasped in those terrible jaws. He imagined the den of foxes, the fox cubs with their newly-formed little teeth, piercing the soft and delicate surface of his skin. The skin he so preciously frees from this winter's debris. He is grossly upset by his smell and, though he spends almost an hour washing, the smell doesn't recede in the least bit. At this point, it occurs to him that perhaps this smell is not coming from him at all. He had noticed the smell when he woke up earlier, but had been too drowsy for it to register as anything more than five months of not bathing. Something has found its way into his burrow. He hears nothing. Still weak, knowing he should check it out, he calls out to it first by clicking his tongue. It doesn't respond. The smell grows more and more putrid as his pulse quickens and his breathing intervals increase. The thing is somewhere between him and the main entrance. It isn't uncommon for a groundhog hole to be occupied by other creatures after they have fallen asleep. Most animals find the holes to be well built and attractive. After the groundhogs have fallen asleep, they haven't much use for them anyway. He calls out to the animal again, relieved at its

unresponsiveness. Perhaps now would be the right time to go out and see what await him in the big world before this thing wakes up.

Whatever it is, it stinks. He remembers that he burrowed an emergency exit a few feet in front of him through a tunnel to the left. As long as that stinking thing isn't this far, he might be able to avoid it and get out. All things considered, even if it is cold and fruitless out there, it has to be better than staying in this stinking hole. If it looks like it is going to freeze again, he can dig himself a small new hole, which might tide him over for the next six weeks until he gets the chance to dig himself a real one. One thing is certain, tired and weak though he is, staying in this hole is no longer an option.

An invigorating wind pulls him towards the entrance as he slowly rehearses the task of walking. Avoiding the stench, he takes the first left in the path and makes his way upwards. In the distance he sees a speck of light beckoning him. The grass, covering his entranceway, is laced shut by small crystals of ice on its blades. A cold front hits him as the brisk wind shoots through the tunnel to the outside world. He stares at the grass just a few feet before him still a little out of focus, he can make out the bud of a dandelion. How beautifully it shivers in the wind. Still closed, but thriving with potential. "Happy new year," he wishes himself, as he approaches the new dandelion, had spring arrived? The grass breaks apart as he claws his way out of the half collapsed hole. He puffs up his fur to try and adjust to the severe change in temperature. He rubs his eyes one more time, and they open revitalized, now in focus. To his left he can see the forest line, crisp and full of fog. To his right the meadow spreads before him; a soft frosty patch of grass, rocks slumping up from the soil.

Before him lies a fallen tree, half-rotted out, crumbling apart. He turns around quickly, remembering the fox, and lets out a sigh of relief in its absence. He looks at the ground, to find no shadow. Would other groundhogs be there to greet him, were others already awake? He grabs the stem of the dandelion between his clumsy paws and bites down hard. How sweet it is, the soft yellow petals melting in his slobber. The petals slide between his teeth and tickle the roof of his mouth. They taste so buttery and soft, not like a dandelion that

is dried by the sun and crunchy, this new bud is moist and fresh, the finest of spring's delicacies. How lucky of him to discover such a treat upon waking, not even sought out. It must be fate. In the distance, he sees a small gathering of mice. They huddle together chewing on pieces of wood. He finishes his dandelion and approaches them. They watch him and laugh. There are about eight or ten little mice, all thin, with small brown specks of what seems to be blood on their fur. He imagines they have lost a friend and offers his condolences.

"Such a pity," he states, prepared to ask what type of predator their friend had fallen prey to, as the group spreads out and simultaneously surrounds him.

Have they never seen a groundhog before? Without the chance to explain himself, three of them pounce on his back and bite down. He can feel the blood begin to slide across his fur, as he attempts to throw the mice from his back. They are out of reach; the others stand before him, squeaking away in delight. He lets out a painful jitter and shakes more vigorously trying to fling them off. They flail with his motions but do not let go. It is unusual for a groundhog to throw himself on his back, a position that this groundhog has never experienced. Unsure if he will be able to roll over and rise again, he springs up and falls down flat on his back. The three mice beneath him wriggle, caught up in his fur, and begin to suffocate under his weight. He screams out, his skin tearing within their miniature jaws. The surrounding mice join in now, pouncing on the belly-up groundhog. He flings his arms left and right, overpowered by the little carnivores. Something is wrong, he concludes, as his power subsides. One of them crawls on his face and begins to chew on his nose. Too shocked to scream out, the pain becomes numb. "It's over," he tells himself, giving into the mice. "I am dead." He repeats this over and over again, in hope that the torture will cease. They squeal as his body becomes limp and the three mice beneath him slip out into the fresh, crisp air. His shadowless body is dragged across the meadow picking up newly sprouted burrs and grains on his fur. The burrs cling to him and remind him of his last escape. Last time, he

returned to his den covered in burrs, panting, out of breath, full stomach, and safe from the coyote that had nearly attacked him. The sprinting distance between his food and his hole is about ten meters. It had always been ten meters. He could run those ten meters faster than anything. Now here he is being pulled by a troupe of militant mice to their den about ten meters, not quite sure what they have in store for him. Spring has arrived, not a reassuring fact, now on the verge of death. He would like to forget about his fatal wounds, the little violent mouse paws, and the cold. Spring starts now, he thinks to himself, with nothing but darkness before his tear-filled eyes. Letting his body slump over and beat every rock in his path. The mice continue to drag him. Their rhythm fades as his dead weight slows their march. Spring spreads out before him. Taunted by images of food and eager women. Women. Women! The thought courses through him like a drop of water at the edge of a fall. The darkness before him clears in an instant, the cloud that rose to kill his shadow. The cloud protecting him from this darkness. In one great last heave of energy, he gathers his wits and throws his body left and right until the mice lose their grip. The mice, exhausted from dragging the heavy groundhog, are unable to hold him down. He breaks free and steps back. Turning, he looks at them one last time before he sprints off. In the direction of his hole, he runs. His nose bleeds, and his legs collapse every second step, but he doesn't stop. He speeds past a large boulder, over a stump, under a fallen branch, through a small puddle of melted snow. The cold shoots through his feet into his legs. His blood trails behind him as he races through the brush. He goes beyond that ten meters and keeps running. The shadows of the laughing mice in the back of his head are biting down hard on his back. He tries to run out the pain, to race the shadow that no longer grips his feet. Spring has come and he knows that where spring is at its start, no shadow will follow him to his death. For a moment, the pain is gone. He runs into the wall of trees. Spring has arrived and nothing is going to keep him from it. An owl hoots uncharacteristically in the distance. It should be sleeping. Owls do not hoot during the day. Perhaps the darkness of the forest knows no

difference. Now he wishes that he were still nestled in his warm dry bed. If it hadn't been for that stinking, trespassing beast in his hole he could have stayed. He has no place to go, he is too weak to dig a new hole, and still hungry.

"What happened to you?" She looks a few seasons younger than him and, though she is thin, she glows with health. Her fur is thick and shiny and her eyes hardly blink as she examines him.

"I was attacked by a group of vicious mice," he sputters out. She laughs.

"Mice don't attack groundhogs," she retorts and laughs again. "What really happened? Was it a fox? A bear... it looks really bad, maybe we should go down to the stream and wash you up?" She starts to walk in the direction of the stream assuming he will follow. He watches her from behind for a moment. Her beautiful form waddles so sweetly as she is careful not to crunch any leaves or step on any insects. He follows. They are silent for a few minutes as they walk in the direction of the creek. The owl hoots again. Don't owls eat groundhogs? He limps along beside her, shivering, unsure as he steps. Can he trust her? He can hear that the creek isn't far off, though he has never been there. She breaks the silence.

"What really happened, come on, you don't have to be embarrassed, I promise I won't laugh. What happened to you?" She looks him straight in the eyes, she is telling the truth and wants to hear a good story. The blood on his nose begins to harden and swell with pain. How ridiculous, he thinks. Of course she wouldn't believe the mouse story, who would? It was absolutely stupid, mice don't attack groundhogs.

"I had just come out of my hole, to have a look around," he begins to re-enact the whole sequence for her, gesturing wildly with his arms. "I realized that I had no shadow, so, took another step out of my burrow. As I was checking for danger, a mountain lion sprang out at me. It was so fast I didn't see it coming." Looking at her to see if she buys it, she is silently urging him on. "Then," he pauses again attempting to build a cohesive story, "then as the cat was carrying me in his jaws back to his den..." he points to the blood dripping from

his back, “ another mountain lion appeared. The second lion tried to take me away from the first one, and a fight broke out. In all their hustle, they dropped me, and I ran until I found myself in a hole that was too deep for them to dig me out of. They continued fighting with each other, until one of them gave up and ran off. I didn’t see the fight completely of course because I was too deep in the hole, but I could hear them. They were ferocious. It sounded like one of them got hurt real bad.” He shakes his head in pity. “Then I waited till the mountain lion left and, well here I am.”

She had never before encountered a groundhog that had survived the attack of a mountain lion. He made an impression. They reach the shores of the creek and cautiously walk out on the rocks. She tenderly washes the wounds on his back that he cannot reach, and he softly wets the swollen lump on his nose. The pain is almost pleasant now with her washing him. His breathing slows and his body steadily heaves up and down as he in- and exhales. She strokes his fur and tries to comfort him.

“You need rest,” she tells him and retreats from the rocks to the shore, heading back in the direction of her burrow. “You shouldn’t go home, it is too dangerous. You can stay with me for tonight.” He follows her to her den. She is kind, beautiful, smart, and generous. And he is too weak to make love to her. Inside her den, he snuggles up beside her and lets himself fall asleep in the folds of her fur.

He falls asleep immediately, a retreat into blackness, hollow, deep blackness, he becomes his shadow. Pulled and walked upon by himself, he is watching himself from below. The sleep is long and immeasurable.

He wakes the next morning, hungry, a little cold. She is no longer wrapped around him like the night before. The den smells familiar and she is gone. Had she—had all of it—been a dream? He cringes at the thought and holds his face tight between his paws. It is dark, he cannot determine if it is his burrow, or the burrow of the woman he had met the night before. He tries to remember what her place looked like, but he was so enamored with her that he hadn’t given his surroundings a second thought. His body aches as a cool breeze sails

through the little tunnel. Is it spring? He wonders. By her absence he is comforted with the possibility that the mouse attack may have never occurred and, yet, he wants her there. Should he go outside and try to find her? If he is in her den, then he runs a great risk of going outside and getting lost. If he is home, the question remains that it may still be the deep and cold middle of winter and there may be no food. He wishes she were still lying there beside him, at least to help him settle some of this confusion. He sits now in fear, after the type of dreamless sleep that is so still your body aches.