

An excerpt from

Five Years

by Teresa Tennyson

If the bee disappeared off the surface of the globe, then man would only have four years of life left.

—Attributed to Albert Einstein

*This is the way the world ends
Not with a bang but a whimper.*

—T.S. Eliot, “The Hollow Men”

Part One: Winter

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They tramped through the mud, the squelching of Elise’s boots making the loudest sound in the declining forest. Lucy picked her way delicately, her paws avoiding the muddiest places, seeking purchase on a decaying plank of wood here, or the smooth top of an emerging boulder there, as reprieves from the liquid filth working its way between her paw pads. She hated dirt more than any dog Elise had ever

known. Once in happier times, there had been a lab with the opposite opinion. In the mudroom of the old Boston house with its polished stone floors, he'd shaken off the brown droplets from his fur, sending them careening over all the white walls until Elise had screamed at him to stop.

It was such a crazy thing to have worried about—mud in the house, mud in the *mudroom*—that today, in this antithesis of Boston urban living, Elise shook her head and chuckled. Lucy froze in the act of evading another puddle and looked up with her serious brown eyes. Elise fondled her ears and told her they must keep going.

They must keep going. That was one of those things people said, whether they believed it or not.

“Because it’s what we do.” Again, she said it aloud, but this time, Lucy didn’t react.

With everything dead and dying, the mosquitoes that were left descended on them with a vengeance. It was the earliest spring ever, landing smack in the middle of February. Five years ago, the idea of black flies and mosquitoes in February would have been laughable. This part of New Hampshire never used to see temperatures above freezing from December through March.

No, there wasn’t much of a winter anymore. Nor was there a New Hampshire, not as far as Elise or anyone within the three-mile-wide confines of Middlewich knew. The remaining government would have collapsed by now, just as the environment had.

Nothing grew anymore. Birds rarely sang. Bees were long gone.

Elise stopped, feeling the breeze over her shoulders. She and Lucy had made it to the darkest part of the forest, where the canopy of old growth crowded out all but the most ambitious saplings. These trees were also dead and dying, even the saplings, but they had carved a piece of landscape where their destruction was comparatively slower than the rest. The glacial erratic boulders, twice as tall as Elise, sat around in their

old man thinkers' poses, looking on impassively. They would see the destruction of this world and many more to come, and they would still be there, sitting and thinking.

Elise knelt in the cool moss, her iron-colored braid flopping over her shoulder, dripping sweat. She took a canteen from her pack and drank. She offered Lucy some, letting it trickle out of the bottle while Lucy lapped at it.

After resting for a few minutes, Lucy emitted a tiny whine. The dog was right: they had dallied too long. They had mushrooms to hunt.

"Onward, Lucy," Elise sighed, standing up and cracking her back. They trudged on, Elise feeling every one of her forty-seven years.

A silver lining to all the decay and humidity was that mushrooms, well, they literally grew on trees. Full of B-vitamins plus potassium and selenium, their only drawback was that they were low in calories and fat, so on a purely fuel level, they weren't worth the energy expended to gather them. Aside from their value as vitamins and minerals, they truly shone in their taste, evoking a richer time when morels were battered in butter and served at unmentionable market prices in trendy restaurants.

Elise knew the location of a cache of morels she had saved for tonight's illustrious occasion. The second anniversary of Middlewich's Sequestration was to be commemorated by a soiree at Leo and Honey's house. Elise was bringing mushrooms.

The morel cache wasn't much farther. Having grown up here, Elise knew this land like the back of her hand. Summers until she was twelve, then year-round when Aunt Helen became her full-time guardian. The morels were hidden in a dell beyond a cluster of climbing boulders that Aunt Helen had named "The Tableau of Giants."

A branch cracked in the woods some distance away. Lucy crouched. "Lucy, don't," Elise ordered, but Lucy had her own ideas about what should be done about that broken branch and took off. Elise saw a flash

of tail as she bounded through a tangle of vines and downed branches. It took only a fraction of a moment for the woods to swallow her up as if she'd never been there.

It wasn't the end of the world, just one of the many things on any given day destined to not happen according to plan. Elise was trying to do a better job of not taking those deviations personally. Why not let the dog romp through the woods? She would be cooped up in the cabin all day. After all, they were on their land, and no predators were about.

Elise wandered after Lucy, a smile crossing her face as she became lost in reverie about the days when she paid exorbitant prices for wild morels at the Charles River Farmers Market, instead of hunting for them in a muddy swamp forest on a muggy day in February.

Half an hour later, Elise had her morels, but there was still no sign of Lucy. Worry nibbled at Elise. Lucy being gone this long wasn't unheard of, but it was unusual. Due to starvation and overhunting, there weren't many bears about since the Change, but they did still exist. People still even hunted them. Bears used to be fearful of dogs, but like other survivors, they weren't so picky about their sources of protein anymore, and they were also more willing to take risks to acquire it.

Elise looked at her watch. She was running out of time to bathe and get ready for ration draw. She couldn't afford to be late on her first time supervising.

"Lucy!" she called in her strictest, I-mean-business voice. If the dog didn't respond to that, something was seriously wrong.

A painful minute passed in which Elise strained to hear any movement in the bush, but the forest was sinisterly quiet. The birds hadn't come back with the early spring. Who knew if they ever would? Maybe this year was the last year. Five years after the Change wasn't a guarantee; it was the upper limit scientists had estimated before the complete collapse of all ecosystems would erase all life on the planet.

“Lucy!” Elise called again and again. Still no response or sounds of movement.

Elise headed north. There wasn’t a good trail here, so she fought her way through brambles and thorns. Surely Lucy would hear her and come. Elise called for her until her throat ached. Or maybe it was allergies from the early spring.

A single sharp bark rang out, unmistakably Lucy. That bark had an urgency to it, like a plea or warning, and had ended abruptly, as if something had cut it off before it was fully released.

Elise continued north, taking pains to move stealthily, though the dry brush made total covertness impossible. Ahead was a place where the bright sky breached the trees, and Elise instinctively knew that Lucy was there. As she approached the edge of the clearing, she heard the low sounds of men talking.

She reached for her rifle, which should have been strapped to her back, but she had been in a hurry that morning and had not wanted to carry the weight. She cursed that decision and crept forward.

Those men had to be the reason Lucy hadn’t returned. Elise could hear their voices but couldn’t make out their words or see them. That sharp bark a few minutes ago: had that been them killing her? Were they outsiders who managed to breach Middlewich’s perimeter wall for the first time since Sequestration? Approaching from the east, Elise’s would have been the first property they would have come to. If so, the cameras would have caught them, and LaRue and his deputies would be on their way to intercept them. But Elise didn’t hear any sirens, which meant the cameras or other detection systems had failed, or the men on her land were from inside Middlewich.

Until Sequestration a couple of years ago, trespassing in Middlewich was no big deal. Unless owners posted their land against trespassing, people by default had unfettered access to their neighbors’ properties while hunting, trapping, fishing, or hiking. But now the penalty for

crossing onto land owned by another citizen without permission meant possible death. Landowners had the right to shoot first and ask questions never. The measure, proposed by the Selectmen, including Elise, and ratified by a whole town referendum in the New Town Code, was meant to discourage the lawlessness and looting happening everywhere else in the world as humanity acted out against its imminent extinction. That chaos was the reason for Sequestration in the first place. Trespassers, knowing they could be shot at will, were incentivized to shoot first. These things happened; it was an uncivilized world. Elise wasn't armed, so if anyone were to start shooting, it would be the trespassing men.

Turning back was the best option under the circumstances, but Lucy was still unaccounted for, which meant the men had her. She might not be dead yet, but she would be soon. Since the Change, people, like bears, took their protein where and when they could get it.

Elise took a swig from her canteen and steeled herself for what she must do next. Then she walked forward brashly and stepped from the edge of the woods into the clearing where the two men stood, one burly and one thin. The larger man held Lucy by the neck, leaving her legs dangling above the ground. His huge hand twisted and gripped her collar. Choking, the dog kicked and struggled.

But she was alive.

Both men were armed, their rifles slung at their sides. They had not yet seen Elise.

"What are you doing?" Elise barked at them. The element of surprise worked to her advantage this time, and both dropped their hands to grab their rifles, which meant the stocky one lost hold of Lucy.

Lucy, never one to question the providence of a dropped piece of bacon, seized the chance to spring away from the men, bounding across the clearing to crouch at Elise's side, baring her teeth in the men's direction. Lucy probably learned her lesson about running off, but Elise

bent down to snap the leash on her collar ring just the same. With Lucy secured, the next task was to get the men on their way without further escalation, which started by communicating to them that she was no threat.

Taking a good look, she realized she knew them. The bigger one was Peter Gagnon, with his untamed curly black hair, and the slimmer, younger blonde was Lucas Young. Gagnon was known as somewhat of a troublemaker, but everything Elise had heard about Lucas indicated he was a sober young man and well-respected.

“Peter Gagnon and Lucas Young? You guys gave me a shock. Thanks for grabbing my dog, but I’ve got her now. You probably didn’t realize it, but you’ve veered off course and wandered onto my land. I imagine you want Conservation land. It’s that way.” Elise pointed west.

The men lowered their rifles. Lucas looked contrite at the trespass, but there was something else entirely in Gagnon’s face.

“Well,” Elise continued, struggling to keep her tone diplomatic, “I guess you’ll be on your way.”

Gagnon let go of one of his well-known, high-pitched peals of laughter that seemed like it should have come from a middle school girl rather than a thirty-five-year-old man. Gagnon infamously found humor in the most inappropriate things. It caused many to underestimate him as an idiot.

“What’s funny?” Elise asked.

Lucas Young blushed, looking like he would rather be anywhere else right now, but Gagnon had the bold look of someone who would not be told what to do or where to go. He wasn’t going to be easy to contend with.

“‘Veered off course. Wandered onto my land.’ It’s funny the way you said it.” Gagnon said, nearly collapsing in another earsplitting fit of laughter. His hands clutched the sides of his prodigious belly.

Maybe it was the energy he spent laughing and gasping, but Elise

now clearly smelled the alcohol rolling from the men's direction. Gagnon's drunkenness added another unpleasant dimension to the confrontation.

Elise remained calm, waiting for him to laugh himself out, while fixing him and Lucas with a quizzical stare. If diplomacy wouldn't work, she'd try a sterner approach.

Finally, Gagnon's strange laughter wound down like a top losing its momentum. "I grew up here, lived here all my life, and somehow managed to lose my ass. That just struck me as funny," he said.

"We're sorry, Selectman Farthington," Lucas offered humbly. "We'll be on our way."

Elise nodded, but Gagnon seemed to take offense at Lucas's apology. "It was only a mistake," Gagnon said, giving Lucas a dirty look.

"Yeah, a mistake." Lucas chewed his lip. "But there's no point in waiting around here and making that mistake worse, is there?" Like Elise, he clearly wanted to de-escalate this. That was something, at least.

Belligerent, Gagnon planted his feet, seemingly disinclined to move, even with Lucas pushing him.

"Conservation land is that way," Elise repeated, again pointing west.

Gagnon wobbled his head like a man who didn't like a woman telling him what to do. "You sure it isn't that way?" He pointed in the opposite direction, where the perimeter wall segregated Middlewich from the rest of the world. "Or that way?" He pointed north to where another section of the perimeter wall lay just beyond the tall pines.

"Come on, Peter," Lucas implored.

"With your extensive knowledge of the area, I'm surprised you got lost at all," Elise said. To her own ears, it sounded like more of a challenge than she meant. But she had pushed too far to backpedal now. "Maybe you've had too much to drink."

Gagnon took a step toward her. "Nothing wrong with drinking, is there? That's not illegal these days, is it?"

"No," Elise said evenly. "You just want to make sure you clean up before ration draw."

Gagnon reacted to her implied threat with his own. "And you want to watch that doggie. Came flying through the clearing at us. It was lucky not to have been shot."

"*You're* lucky not to have been shot. You're on private land, Gagnon, and you know the law," Elise said loudly. Her voice was increasingly aggressive, but she didn't want him to mistake her restraint for weakness. In this world, being weak made you a target.

He looked her up and down, perhaps wondering if she had a weapon he couldn't see. She saw the moment in his eyes when he decided she wasn't worth that risk.

"I was just playing," Gagnon said, his voice changing. "I wouldn't have hurt her. You're a cute doggie, aren't you?" He bent and snapped his fingers at Lucy, as if calling her to him.

Lucy held her ground and growled.

"Come on, Peter." Lucas Young grasped Gagnon by the upper arms, steering him west.

After they were out of sight, Gagnon called back in a singsong voice, taunting. "Seeeeeee you later, Selectman Farthington. Sorry that we trespassed on your land!" He didn't sound the least bit sorry.

Elise kept Lucy on the lead. The conflict seemed to be over, but she was left with a sense of foreboding.

"Come on, Lucy, let's get home."

There was still a long day ahead.