

The Prophet Calls



MELANIE
SUMROW

1.

“Let’s play apocalypse!” my cousin yells.

In the shade of the general store, my three mothers shake their heads in unison.

Sweat creeps down my back. It’s so hot already. I wish I could strip off the long underwear beneath my ankle-length dress, but the Prophet says we must always wear our sacred underwear if we want to survive the real apocalypse.

Several of the kids squeal, “We’re gonna die!” I have twenty-one brothers and sisters and about eighty cousins. Most of them scatter and duck behind the piñon trees.

My younger sister tugs on my hand. “Gentry, let’s hide before the government comes.” A few strands of Amy’s light-blond hair have already escaped her braid.

I shift between my feet, fighting the urge to run off with her. “I can’t.”

"But you're my partner in crime," she says, mimicking the words I've used on her so many times. When I don't budge, she pushes her thick glasses up the bridge of her nose. "You always play."

I shade my eyes from the midmorning sun with my hand as I try to figure out how to explain. She's right; I *always* play. The problem is, it's my thirteenth birthday, and I'm not supposed to play anymore.

I thought I'd wake up and find someone different in the mirror today: a grown-up Gentry. But I'm still wearing the same old prairie dress with the patched rip in the sleeve. I have the same freckles across my cheeks and the same red hair in a long braid down my back. I look and feel the same as I did yesterday and the day before. I still want to play.

Tanner smacks my arm with a grin. "You two better run, or else." He wiggles his eyebrows. My older brother is sixteen and likes to pretend he's an evil government agent.

Channing Snell bumbles up behind him, his dark hair flopping across his forehead. There's a fading bruise on the side of his neck. "What's the holdup?" he asks. He's the same age as me, but he's still allowed to play.

"You know I'm not supposed to," I say, pushing my sleeves up to my elbows. My gaze moves between the huddles of older girls in pastel dresses. That's where I'm supposed to be now.

It takes me a second to find my sister Meryl, sitting alone on a wooden bench. She reads a spiral-bound copy of *Pronouncements of the Prophet*. With her golden hair in a fancy braid and large blue eyes, she resembles our mother more than any of us. Meryl is my most beautiful sister. She makes the best green chile stew and can recite all of the Prophet's revelations from memory.

Meryl shares the same mother as Tanner, Amy, Baby Bill, and me, but she's nothing like us—she's a total rule-follower. And very, very good at getting me into trouble. I'd say they switched her at the hospital, but we don't have one.

She looks up from her reading and automatically zeros in on me. Meryl points to my arms. I quickly shove my sleeves down to my wrists before she has a chance to rat me out to Mother.

"Since when do you do anything you're supposed to?" Tanner asks as he tugs at his buttoned-up collar.

Channing gives a knowing laugh. "Come on, Gentry. One more time?"

Kids streak past, yelling about explosions and gunfire. Our baby brother wails in Mother's arms. Meryl rushes over to dig inside my brother's diaper bag and soon pulls out a bottle. She hands it to our mother.

"Please, *please* play with us," Amy says in a drawn-out voice.

I look over at our other mothers. Father's first wife, Mother

Lenora, approaches Mother Dee. While they chat, Mother Lenora slides her hand around the circumference of Mother Dee's pregnant belly. No doubt Mother Lenora is rattling off about how it's a wife's duty to bless her husband. She's kind of a know-it-all that way. In all ways.

Our mother starts to feed Baby Bill.

"You're not scared, are you?" Tanner asks with a grin.

"Please," Amy says. "You find the best hiding places."

Meryl and our mothers are too busy to notice. Would it really hurt to play one more time? I turn to Amy. "Come on. I know just where to hide."

Amy giggles as we take off and run uphill, darting past the New Mexican scrub and sagebrush that litter the foothills around us.

Behind us, I hear Channing counting to fifty.

"They're coming," Amy says, pretending a large army is after us. Some of the smaller children begin to cry.

Our shoes form clouds of dust as we zigzag between the junipers and yellow-flowering brush along the hillside. Amy sometimes has a hard time breathing, so I try to find a good hiding spot for her to catch her breath.

When we've gotten higher than everyone else, we duck behind an oversize lavender bush. We brush against it, and the flowers' sweet perfume fills the air.

I wipe the sweat from my forehead and peek beyond the purple flowers. From up here, I can see beyond the concrete wall that surrounds our community and keeps the rest of the world out. I scan the scrub-covered hills and the Sangre de Cristo Mountains in the distance, trying to spot the nearest town, but it's no use. We're miles away.

Amy breathes heavy through her mouth. She points to a Mexican Elder tree a few feet from us. "We could . . . climb it," she suggests, winded. Amy's the best tree climber I know—fast and sure-footed. But she's still out of breath.

"Let's stay where we are," I suggest, since no one's following us. Yet. I point to the blue and cloudless sky, whispering, "Bomber planes." My sister shivers. Maybe she's also imagining the dead bodies of some of our brothers and sisters scattered along the hillside after the government's planes drop missiles on all of us.

Downhill, our cousins pretend to aim cannons and shoot down the planes. A few of the boys act like airplanes and make crashing sounds. As God's chosen people, we'll have to defeat the government at the end of the world in order to bring about a thousand years of peace. I just hope I'm ready when the time comes.

"We're winning," Amy says, excited.

A black-tailed jackrabbit bounds out from behind a nearby

bush, startling Amy and me. Its long, broad ears bob with each hop. "Rabbit," Amy screams and almost darts out from our hiding place to chase it.

I snag her skirt, keeping her hidden. "Not now. They'll see you."

From the base of the hill, the older boys begin to charge and yell, "Die!"

Between heavy breaths, Amy wheezes as she realizes she's given away our hiding spot. "What're we gonna do? The government agents are moving uphill."

My heart races with excitement. "Let's keep climbing."

"But they'll see us," Amy protests as I take off.

After a second, I realize I don't hear the pounding of my sister's shoes behind me. I turn and see she's fallen not far from the lavender bush. The boys have stopped midway to throw imaginary grenades at another group of kids. I lift the hem of my skirt and run downhill toward my sister.

Amy sits up, her face scrunched in pain, as I get to her. Red dirt covers the front of her yellow dress.

I drop to my knees and try to stay hidden. "You okay?"

She holds out her hand for me to see. It's bleeding a little from where she hit a small pointy rock. A tear runs down her dirty face. "I thought you were gonna leave me," she says, still winded.

“What?” With my thumb, I wipe her tear and smear away the dirt on her cheek. “I could never leave you.” I take the underside of my skirt and blot the blood from her hand.

My sister rubs her lips together like she’s unsure.

“Never.” I kiss my index finger and touch her cut softly.
“Ever.”

That brings a smile to her face.

“You sure you’re okay?” I ask.

With a sniffle, Amy nods. I help her stand and brush the dirt off her dress as much as I can before Meryl or our mothers see it.

Below, some of my half brothers and sisters are starting to sneak away from their hiding places, and form prayer circles at the foot of the hill. They link hands. After the real battle at the end of the world, we’re supposed to gather here in Watchful or in Waiting, our sister community in Canada, to pray for God’s deliverance.

Outside one of the prayer circles, Channing stumbles. He clutches his chest, pretending he’s been hit, and drops to the ground.

If Amy and I can get to a circle without a government agent killing us first, we’re saved.

“Gotcha,” Tanner yells from a few feet away, making us both jump. He pretends to throw a grenade, but we dodge

it and start the downhill run. Although holding Amy's hand slows us, I don't let go.

Suddenly, the prayer circles break apart. What are they doing? That's not how the game works.

My feet come to a sudden stop. Amy bangs into my back, nearly knocking me over.

"Ow," she says as she adjusts her glasses. "That hurt."

My muscles tense when I see him. The bishop of Watchful paces along the bottom of the hill. With a long neck and a beak-like nose, Uncle Max likes to strut around in his black suit kicking up dust. He's not really our uncle. He's one of the Prophet's brothers. We're supposed to call him "uncle" out of respect.

"Children," Uncle Max screeches.

Tanner shrieks softly behind me. Once, I made the mistake of telling him Uncle Max reminds me of a vulture. Amy giggles.

I smack Tanner's arm to shush him before he gets us all into trouble.

"By the way," Tanner says under his breath. He axes our shoulder blades with the side of his hand. We flinch. "You just got the tomahawk. You're both dead."

Amy looks worried, but I shake my head and whisper, "It doesn't count since we had to stop in the middle of the game."

The worry leaves her face. “Yeah,” she says a little too loud. Tanner smiles.

“Children,” the Vulture screams again.

Now he’s looking at us. Me. I wipe my sweaty hands on my skirt.

His beady eyes narrow, and I hope he doesn’t remember I’m thirteen today. The last girl he caught playing after she turned thirteen had to sit in his office and write *Obedience is the key to my salvation* one thousand times without food or bathroom breaks. And that was one of his easier punishments.

No one says a word as we wait for Uncle Max to speak. It’s so quiet I can hear the drum of a hummingbird’s wings flitting from flower to flower on a red-blooming salvia bush nearby.

Uncle Max finally turns in the direction of the meetinghouse. “It’s time for service,” he says. I can breathe again.

We merge in with the rest of the Prophet’s followers at the base of the hill. Channing has already joined his brothers and sisters. My family, along with the hundreds of other residents of Watchful, funnels toward the meetinghouse. We’re not supposed to talk. As we walk, we’re supposed to think about all the sacrifices the Prophet is making for us. He’s in prison in East Texas, far from Watchful. My parents won’t tell me why, but Meryl says it’s because the outsiders hate us.

Tanner elbows me in the ribs, but I don't dare cry out. I've already had a close call with the Vulture today. And once is enough for anybody.

When my brother doesn't get a rise out of me, he drops back in our family's moving cluster. He bumps around with some of our half brothers until he finally gets Kel to squeal. Amy and I chuckle.

Mother Lenora turns and glares at us. I bite the inside of my cheek to keep from laughing.

After a few minutes, we reach the large meetinghouse with its rust-colored stucco walls and flat roof. We move past the heavy wooden door into the darkened foyer. I shiver from the sudden coolness.

Out of nowhere, a hand with long, pale fingers grabs my arm. I gasp as my eyes adjust to see Uncle Max.

His face pinches as he releases me. "Disgraceful," he says. His breath smells sour. He points to my skirt. That's when I look down and see the two red dirt spots around my knees.

My heart bangs against my ribs. I'm caught.

Tanner's still goofing off as he walks through the door. Uncle Max snatches him, too. "Not so fast," he croons.

The dumb grin leaves Tanner's face.

"I must speak with *both* of you."

I stand, frozen.

My brother's gaze darts between Uncle Max and me for a clue as to what's going to happen next.

All I can think is now would be a really, *really* good time for the world to end.