

Excerpt from *Prophet and Loss*

The sun is baking the countryside. It's dry and stark, like everything is standing out in sharp relief. I crank down the window and rest my right arm on the door, letting the sun warm my skin through the cloth. The mountains are going by and I'm trying to spot coyotes or deer out the window, but all I can make out is the skittering of ground squirrels through the dry grass. Far away to the west I can see a couple of eagles up in the sky, watching over everything.

"You know what I'm thinking?" Hugh looks over at me for a moment, then back at the road.

"What?" I try to guess.

"I'm thinking we should just forget about Merciful and keep on driving."

"Where would we go?"

"Vancouver."

"Vancouver? What for?"

"Just to get away. I've got some money to carry us for a while."

"But what would we do?"

"Look. You don't want to marry Dad, right?"

I don't answer.

“You don’t have to say. Anyway, listen, Tammy. I made a big mistake last week. Big, big mistake.” He slaps the dashboard with his right hand.

“Mistake? What did you do?”

“I told Dad that now that I’m old enough, I want to marry you.”

I clasp my hands in my lap and look down at them. I don’t want to marry either of them. I want to go to school. Finally I ask, “So what did he say?”

Hugh waves his hand, but doesn’t say anything for a moment. We’re going faster than the speed limit and I wonder if I should mention it.

“He told me I was speaking out of my proper place and that he’s going to tell the Prophet to send me on a mission to straighten out my attitude.”

“A mission? Like to Utah or Arizona or something?”

“Something like that. But here’s what I think. He’s just getting rid of me so he can have you. The same thing happened to Simon Cartwright, remember? When he was old enough to get married, they sent him away, too.”

“He was the one that wanted to marry Esther, right?”

“Right. But Elder Thornton wanted Esther.”

Hugh notices how fast he’s driving and slows down a little. I think about what would happen if I told Hugh, “Okay, let’s do it.” It probably wouldn’t even work. How far would we get before they figured out we were gone and called the police? Could we stay lost for long, with me underage? How would we explain it?

On the other hand, what did I have to lose? If I called Auntie Ruth, she might not be able to take me in, since she lives so close to Merciful. The elders might give her a lot of trouble. And how could I repay her, if I just showed up like that? That plan might not work either.

“I’ve got to warn you about something, though,” Hugh says after a while.

I look up and wait.

“If you run away, they might just replace you with somebody else. Somebody younger.”

“Younger?”

“Yeah. Like Diana.”

“Diana!” I gasp. “Oh, my God, Hugh. They wouldn’t do that, would they?”

Hugh shrugs. “I’ve heard father saying that the Prophet wants to start marrying off girls before they can get rebellious.”

Diana. One time when she was little, she was crying because she was scared of a thunderstorm, and I hugged her and promised her I would protect her forever.

Suddenly, I feel desperate for her.

“Hugh, could we sneak back and grab Diana, and take her with us?”

“Tammy, there’s no time! If we’re going to do this, we’ve got to go now.”

I sit for a moment. For some reason, I keep thinking about what I saw this morning, when the hawk caught the hare. I picture Leah telling Diana that she is going to be sealed to the file leader. But if I rush back to protect Diana, wouldn’t

something like that happen to her anyway eventually? In a few years' time, we'd both be sitting in lawn chairs beside Leah. Both of us pregnant.

Hugh keeps driving west, while glancing over at me occasionally. At last I wave my hand in the direction of the road ahead.

“All right, Hugh. Let's go. Let's get lost.”