

Chapter One

September

Steady now.

Calm down.

Slow your breathing.

You can do it.

It was taking every ounce of self-control, but Tara could feel her chest relaxing and her breath becoming steadier. Occasionally, she cringed with the volume of each inhale and exhale, but she kept reminding herself that everything sounded loud when surrounded with silence. She could even hear her heart pounding. A drop of sweat broke from her hairline and rolled down the side of her face, stopping near her ear. She lifted her shoulder to stop the droplet, and the salty sphere was quickly absorbed into her tee shirt.

The voices outside the barn moved closer, and she held her breath again. The sounds of footsteps seemed as loud as thunder in the silence of the night. A couple more moist drops rolled down her cheek, but this time they were from her eyes. At the thought of Noah, his dark, sober eyes and wavy hair, his half smile and suppressed chuckle, his selfless sacrifice, Tara's chest immediately began to ache. A lump swelled in her throat and she choked back a whimper.

How did I get here? Why am I still alive?

The voices outside began to fade. A car door clicked closed, followed by a second, then an engine started and the car shifted into gear. Slowly the wheels began to roll on the loose gravel.

Incredibly slowly.

Headlights flashed through the loose wooden slats of the barn, and Tara squinted against its glare. She breathed easier as the car headed down the dirt road back to the highway.

But she knew the car—and those that pursued her—could return at any time.

She peered through a knothole, watching as the glow of taillights disappeared. A low, flat layer of clouds blocked the moon's light and the darkness lay like a thick blanket across the countryside. She had followed Noah's directions to the barn, traveling only at night, running for hours at a time to cover as much distance as possible, and now all she could do was wait. Terror had seized her when the car pulled up just minutes earlier, and her heart still thumped hard against her ribs. If she had been spotted, she would have been shot. As the sound of the tires faded to silence, Tara shook her head in wonder. Once again, she was alone. And safe.

By now her eyes had adjusted to the dark, and she studied the tractor next to her. It was large, and felt rusted and old. Tara stood and stretched her legs. She wiped her arm across her forehead, trying to stay the flow of perspiration. She grasped a metal rod on the tractor for balance. She was tired and hadn't eaten all day. Through the barn she heard the crack of a branch and it made her jump. Tara thought they had left, but perhaps she had been fooled. She crouched again to look out the knothole, but saw nothing. She held her breath and waited but saw no movement. After a few minutes, she steadied herself,

stood again, turned and leaned against the barn's wall. She looked across the space littered with farming equipment, then toward the door she had entered through. It was open. A man stood in the doorway, his arms outstretched, hands resting on either doorpost. Tara gasped, realizing he was looking at her. There was nowhere to run.

“Tara?”

Tara bit her lip. She put her hands over her mouth and chose not to answer. Her ears were playing tricks on her.

“Tara? That is you over there, isn't it?”

“Noah?”

“Yeah, it's me.”

At the sound of his voice, relief flooded over Tara's whole body. She had not quite let herself accept that she would never see Noah again, but deep in her heart she had feared the worst. Now he stood in the door and without any thought, Tara began to run to him.

“I thought you would never make it!”

“It's me, Tara. You have nothing to be afraid of.”

Tara suddenly stopped and forced herself to think. How could it be Noah? Then again, stranger things had happened in the last twenty-four hours alone. She studied his silhouette in the doorway and her fears dissipated. Yes, it was Noah! It had to be. She'd know him anywhere. She quickly moved again, cutting the distance between the two of them in no time. Without hesitation, she flung her arms around his neck and squeezed him hard as she began to weep.

“Don’t cry,” he whispered. She felt him wrap his arms around her and for a brief moment all was right with the world. She struggled to speak, but after a few seconds she broke the silence.

“I thought you were ...”

“Oh, come on. You should know by now it’s going to take more than a couple of policemen to do me in.”

Tara pulled away, squinting as she tried to make out his face. Oh, how she loved his voice! And his ability to downplay a crisis ...

“A couple? It was more like an army, if I remember correctly!”

“Whatever. I’ve got more lives than a cat, but I’m starting to get low on my count, thanks to you!”

Tara squeezed him again and smiled.

“Stop joking! Did you just get here?”

“Yeah. We can talk later, but for now we need to keep moving.”

“This isn’t the meeting place?”

Noah took Tara’s hand and led her further into the barn.

“Be careful—there’s a lot of equipment in here. Don’t cut yourself.”

He pointed to something with his left hand, his right firmly grasping her own. There was so much she wanted to say, so much she needed to know. She decided to just follow directions and keep her questions to herself, though they were adding up quickly in her mind. Noah led her back to the corner where she had originally been hiding. He bent down and started to gently run his hands across the floor. She heard him wince, and she bit her lip, assuming a splinter had found its way into his finger. The sound of his

hand sweeping back and forth across the floor continued a few more times until the creak of a rusted hinge broke the silence.

“Here it is. I knew there was a ring to pull here somewhere.”

Noah grunted a few times until Tara realized she was standing on the trap door, and quickly apologizing, moved to the side. He lifted the door and carefully laid it on the floor, revealing a black hole.

“You go in first. I’ll lift the door back into place once I’m in.”

Tara tried to take a deep breath and move toward the opening, but all she could muster was a whimper. She put her hands to her face and began to sob. It wasn’t like her to struggle with emotion, but she found she’d reached her breaking point. She heard Noah take a step toward her and felt his warm arms wrap around her again.

“I know this is a lot to take in,” he whispered gently in her ear. “I’m not going to leave you, and the hard part is over. Getting here was a big deal, and I am so proud of you. This tunnel leads to safety. Soon you’ll feel much better.”

Tara stood in his embrace and let his words soak in. He had never lied to her before. In fact he was the most honest man she knew. And what was the big deal about a black hole? Hadn’t she gone through worse to get here? After a moment, Tara decided she could do this, and she pulled away from Noah and looked down at the dark opening in the floor. Before she even asked, he answered her question.

“Charlie left us a flashlight. It should be on the floor by the bottom of the ladder.”

Tara felt around the circumference of the opening. Eventually her fingers rested on the rounded wooden end of a ladder. She sat and put her feet into the hole, reaching with her toes until she felt a rung on the ladder. Noah put his hand on her back to steady

her as she carefully lowered herself into the tunnel. Climbing down, an even greater darkness enveloped her.

And I thought the barn was dark. I'm not sure I can do this.

In a few moments her feet touched solid ground, and she let out a sigh of relief. She could hear Noah replace the door and then start down the steps. She quickly bent down and felt around for a flashlight. Just as Charlie had promised, the flashlight was at the base of the ladder. Tara decided that no matter who he was, this Charlie guy was getting a big hug when she met him.

Noah was nearing the ground when Tara clicked on the flashlight. The light was a welcome sight for seriously sore eyes. Tara turned the beam toward the ladder so Noah could see what he was doing as he took the final three rungs with ease. She felt a tickle on her neck and without thinking swatted at something that was working its way toward her shoulder. She shivered and mussed her hair with her free hand, hoping any other unwelcome pests would fall away. Her hair felt damp, either from perspiration or even worse, lack of shampoo and water. This was no time to worry about cleanliness, she told herself as she glanced down at her filthy tee shirt. She lifted her head and watched as Noah turned around and flashed that familiar crooked grin at her.

“Nice to see you again.” He reached for the flashlight. “Do you want to lead?”

“Uh, no, thanks,” Tara stammered, as she handed the flashlight to Noah, hoping he wouldn’t notice her hair.

Noah touched her shoulder. “Are you feeling any better?”

“Yeah, thanks,” she replied. *Now that I'm with you.*

Noah pointed the flashlight up the hole they had just descended. It was about twenty feet to the top and Tara could see the wooden trap door back in place. Noah turned and scanned the tunnel with the light. There was only one direction to walk, and the ceiling was low, forcing Noah to duck as he walked. Though she was considerably shorter, Tara still felt cramped.

As she followed Noah closely, Tara's thoughts continued to reel with the details of the past few weeks. Colors flashed before her mind's eye—the yellow police tape across her front door, the gray sky hanging over the fields of dying brown corn stalks, the orange glow from the bonfire on the street, the body of little Isaiah covered with a crisp white sheet. She shivered in the dampness of the tunnel and reached for the hem of Noah's shirt. Holding it made her feel connected, safe.

Occasionally they would pass a familiar strong odor in the tunnel, but Tara couldn't place the smell. Tree roots? Sewage? Then she remembered where the memory came from. As a child she would go camping with her parents. Fresh pinewood had a distinct smell, strangely like vomit more than anything else. She twisted the end of Noah's shirt tighter around her finger and covered her mouth and nose with her free hand.

Oh, dear God, how did it come to this? Did You really try to warn me? How could I have been so blind?

A thought came to Tara, and she suddenly glanced behind her into the darkness. Her heart was pounding again, and the sweat was starting to return. What if they were being followed? Was that a light she saw or ... no, it was nothing. She looked back at Noah and decided it was too frightening to look behind her again. What could she do if she saw a light? She was already moving as fast as she could, and there was only one way

to go. Trust was a new concept for her, but for now she would have to trust Noah. And God. Especially God.

The tunnel had been dug through layers of soil, rock, and large tree roots that protruded into the tunneled-out area, tearing at Tara's arms. The beam from Noah's flashlight was pointed ahead of them, so she didn't always see the dangerous limbs. Twice she tripped on roots and loose stones, stumbling into Noah's back. The first time he stopped and asked if she was all right, then he kept on moving and she did her best to keep pace.

The only sounds Tara could hear was the heavy breathing coming from her guide as well as from her own mouth. She was amazed at the work that had gone into digging the tunnel and wondered if anyone else had used it out of desperation or if she was the only one so completely unprepared for this crisis. As her mind wandered in multiple directions, she finally told her thoughts to shut up and started to pray. This wasn't about her anyways—it was about Him.

About an hour into the tunnel, Noah stopped, sat down, and leaned against the wall. Normally a dirty rest stop would not have been appealing, but considering her current state, Tara didn't think twice and sat next to him. She needed the break. Noah turned off the flashlight.

"I don't know how much battery time we've got, so if you don't mind ... we need to conserve."

"Sure, just don't leave without me."

"I'm not going anywhere." She felt him reach and find her hand. She choked back a tear, not from fear but out of the sheer relief of the touch of his hand.

After a moment of silence, as the two caught their breath, Tara spoke.

“So who is Charlie exactly? I know his name but not many details.”

Tara could hear a soft chuckle and imagined a grin on his face.

“Where do I begin?” Noah started. “I’ve known Charlie for about five years now. He’s the one who brought me to the fellowship. I met him at a picnic—he was working for a caterer at that time, and we struck up a conversation while folding up tables and chairs. He’s an amazing follower—one of those fearless, “I’m-going-to-die-when-God-is-good-and-ready-for-me-to-die” kind of guys.”

“What do you mean?”

“It took him about five minutes to ask me if I knew Jesus at that picnic. Here we are, in broad daylight, people everywhere, and in full voice he was like, ‘Hey, do you know Jesus?’”

“What did you do?”

“Well, back then, I looked around, lowered my voice and asked him if he was crazy! He looked back at me and laughed. He said, ‘You’ve got to be kidding me! Do you really think anyone around here cares what I say? They’ve all heard it from me before and will most likely hear it again!’ And you know what? I’m pretty sure he witnessed to them until he became a runner.”

Tara swatted at another tickle on her ear. “A runner? What’s that?”

“Oh, sorry. That’s someone who runs the tunnels from the compound to the real world. There are about ten of them all together. They can get news or supplies, but mostly just help newbies arrive.”

“I must be a newbie.”

“Sorry again. We have developed our own vocabulary and, yeah, you are a newbie.”

“So, you’re a runner.”

“Everything is changing so quickly, I don’t know how much longer we’ll need runners.”

“But after you get me to the compound, will you have to go back out?”

Noah sat quiet for a moment and Tara waited for his answer. She felt him fumble with the flashlight and then it turned on. She looked at his tired face.

“Do you trust me?”

“Of course I do.”

“Then stand up and look at me.”

Tara stood and faced Noah. The flashlight was pointing down, but in the glow of the light she could still see his face. It was smudged with dirt, and she couldn’t help but smile at him.

“Close your eyes.”

“Come on, Noah,” she protested. Why was he stalling?

“Just close them.”

She closed her eyes. Her heart skipped a beat as she felt his hand brush her shoulder. Confused, she opened them again, and dangling from his fingers was one of the biggest spiders she had ever seen, the kind with the fuzzy legs. She stifled a shriek as Noah smiled at her.

“I was hoping to step on this before you saw it.”

“There’re more of those, aren’t there?”

“Probably, but if we keep moving we should be fine.”

After doing a spin so that Noah could see if there were anymore, Tara checked him, not sure she could actually pull one off him if there was one. Thankfully, there were none. She shivered at the thought that it was one of those hairy monsters she had swatted away twice before without knowing.

“You never answered my question,” Tara said, as they started walking again.

“Which one?”

“Are you going back after you get me to the compound?”

“Since I haven’t recovered the supplies stored at my house, I have at least one more trip.”

“But the Day of Destruction has changed everything, Noah.”

He said nothing but continued through the tunnel. Tara knew what this meant. A few days earlier he had attempted to retrieve those supplies, and she thought he had been captured. They knew where he lived and no doubt, they knew what he wanted from there. But Tara knew him well enough. When Noah had his mind set on something, it was nearly impossible to change it.

Tara mustered all the courage she could find and looked behind her once more. Still darkness.

Were they truly going to be safe? Was there anywhere that was safe anymore? And did safety matter if the man she loved chose not to stay with her?

Tara made up her mind. She had proven she was as stubborn as Noah. She had to convince him to stay. It was their only chance to be together.