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Tara: Life on the Run

*Pakistan
June 1985*

The postman walked up to the familiar mansion and peered through the window. The entryway alone was as large as many entire homes in the villages of Pakistan. “I have a package for Tara,” the postman said when a servant finally answered the door. “I need her signature. May I come in?” He was carrying a medium-sized brown cardboard box under his arm. His pen was already out.

“No, you cannot come in,” the servant answered sternly. “Give the package to me, and I will take it to Tara. Her father will not permit her to come to the door.”

“OK,” the postman reluctantly agreed. “But I must get a signature from Tara or someone in authority. Otherwise I cannot leave the package; do you understand?”

“Yes, yes,” the servant said impatiently, his hands extended. “Now please give me the package.”

Tara was watching from around the corner, wondering what

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the fuss was about and who would be sending her a package. “What is this?” she asked the servant. “Who’s it from?” The servant shrugged and handed Tara the paper to sign. She scribbled her name then reached for the package. It was heavier than she expected. She wrapped both arms around it and shuffled to her room, shutting the door behind her. Although Tara’s family was quite large, she had her own well-furnished room. Opposite her large windows were built-in dressers, and on each side of the bed were attractive nightstands, each topped with an elegant crystal lamp. Tara’s father had a soft spot for his young daughter, and her room was filled with the lavish gifts he showered upon her.

Now she was as excited as any child of twelve would be to receive an unexpected package in the mail. She placed the box on the floor, knelt down in front of it, and ripped back the tape that secured the cardboard flaps. Peering inside the box, Tara gasped. Her joyful curiosity quickly turned to trepidation. She jumped to her feet and ran back to her door, opened it just enough to poke her head out, and peered up and down the hall to make sure no one was near. Again she closed the door, but this time she locked it before returning to the open box in the middle of her bedroom floor.

An inner voice said she should just turn the box over to her father. *That would be the safe thing to do*, she told herself. She could simply tell her father she had no idea why it had arrived with her name on it. But the truth was, Tara *did* know why the box had arrived. It contained something she had sent for. A few weeks earlier she had filled out a small coupon in the local newspaper and mailed it. Now the ordered item had come, and she feared what would happen to her if she was caught with it. Her young mind began to race. She had to decide whether to keep it, in hiding of course, or tell her father.

Her curiosity overruled her fear, and she lifted one of the

small books out of the box. The book had a single-word title on its soft ivory cover: *Genesis*. Sitting on her bed, she opened the cover and began to read.

From the first day the Bible curriculum arrived, Tara pored over the material, completing two or more courses nearly every week. She sealed her completed tests in the envelopes that came with the curriculum and asked a house servant to mail them. A short while later, a new certificate would arrive in the mail, congratulating Tara on her success.

Tara, who came from a very prominent and strict Muslim family known throughout Pakistan, had no intention of changing her faith. She was simply caught up in the study of the Bible and especially enjoyed receiving the fancy certificates. It was easy and fun, and it also offered an exciting element of peril as she carefully tucked the box and its contents under her bed each day. The servants who helped her send and receive the mail were sworn to secrecy. Everyone knew her father would be furious if he found out. But everyone also knew Tara was her father's favorite girl. He would be mad, yes, but more than likely he would simply scold her and take away the curriculum. She was just having fun. *What harm could come from studying?* she asked herself.

Two and a half years later, Tara mailed in the last test. She had completed the entire course, studying every book of the Bible. She felt a sense of satisfaction in completing such a large curriculum and still marveled that it had all been provided for free and her secret had gone undetected. A few weeks later she was even more surprised when another box arrived. It was much smaller than the one the course came in but was still relatively heavy for its size. Tara knew it was from the same people who had sent the course and the completion certificates, but she had no idea what was in the small box. To her amazement it was a beautiful blue Bible with page edges that were gilded in gold. It

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was the most beautiful book Tara had ever seen. Opening the front cover, she noticed her name written in fancy script in an acknowledgment of her successful completion of the entire Bible course. Tara carefully flipped through the onionskin pages before hiding her new gift under her bed with the other books. The curriculum was dangerous enough. If she was caught with a Bible, she knew there would be hell to pay.

Actually, she didn't know the half of it.

THE CHRISTIAN

The following year, after completing her tenth year in school with high honors, Tara was invited to do a comparative religion study in Iran. Her family made pilgrimages to Iran quite often, and Tara was eager to take on the challenge of studying there. She also believed her secret study of the Bible would give her a nice start in her study of Christianity.

Her family accompanied her on the study trip, and it was while they were in Iran that Tara met a Christian for the first time. It happened when she left the hotel one afternoon, planning to take pictures of the courtyard outside the local mosque for a presentation she had been assigned for her class. It was dangerous for a young foreign girl to be moving about alone, but Tara promised her eldest brother, who was looking out for her that day, that she would stay close to the hotel, and he had reluctantly agreed that she could go.

As she walked through the courtyard snapping photos, she came upon a curious sight. A man was sitting on the ground next to a girl a few years younger than Tara. His hands were folded tightly, and he was looking into the sky, apparently speaking with someone.

"What are you doing?" Tara asked, feeling a strange draw to this man.

"I'm talking to God," he answered simply.

"You can't talk to God," Tara argued, punctuating her remark with innocent laughter. "He will not come down to speak with you, and you cannot go up to Him unless you die. So how can you say such a thing, that you are *talking* to God?"

The man patiently looked at Tara, and with a smile he added, "I not only spoke with God, I got an answer."

Now Tara was sure the man was crazy. "You got an *answer*? You are not a prophet or an angel. How could you possibly get an answer from God?"

"Do you want to know how you can talk with God?"

"Yes, of course I would like to know," Tara answered. She didn't believe him for a minute, but she wanted to hear his explanation, futile as it probably was.

Then meet me tomorrow at four o'clock. Here, I'll write down the location for you." Pulling out a blank piece of paper, the man wrote down the address and directions to his church. "You come here, and you will not only know that you can talk with God, but you'll know He loves you too."

When Tara got back to the hotel and shared her experience, her brother was furious. "What are you thinking?! You cannot go to that place. It is a Christian church! This is Iran, and you are a Muslim. You could be hanged for being caught in such a place!"

"I have been assigned to do a study on different religions. How can I complete my studies if I do not do my research?" Tara protested.

The argument ended with Tara's brother agreeing to make an official request at the local police station to visit the church. From there he was then sent to the courthouse, where permission was granted. But the officials required her to be accompanied by twelve security officers and her older brother when she visited the church.

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“You will not have to be afraid,” her brother said. “I will be right outside the door with the police should anything happen.” Tara wondered what went on in a church that would require such high security.

The following afternoon at four, Tara entered the church. She walked in slowly, her body slightly trembling, as the security guards and her brother waited outside. Except for the man in the courtyard, Tara had never met anyone who was not a Muslim. She wondered what Christians looked like, how they acted. Were they dangerous?

She found a seat near the back of the church. She chose a spot that was close to the main entrance so she could make a quick exit if she needed to. Most of the wooden benches were already full, and the singing had already begun. The church members sang different choruses, and Tara thought she recognized in the lyrics some of the verses she’d studied in the Bible curriculum. After the singing, a man stepped up to the podium and began to speak about prayer. He said that anyone who had a prayer request should come forward.

As a few people began to make their way to the front, Tara saw the man she had met in the courtyard the previous day. He was carrying a small girl of about eight; Tara assumed it was another one of his daughters. This one seemed to be completely crippled. Her arm flopped loosely against her father’s back as he carried her. Her eyes were empty, and she barely looked alive.

The man walked to the front and began to pray aloud, asking God to heal his child. Others in the church joined in and began pleading with God to heal the girl. Tara again thought a person would have to be crazy to try to speak with God this way. Why would God come down to help this child? To Tara, it made absolutely no sense. But despite her skepticism she was mesmerized by the activity and wanted to remember all that was happening so she could write about it in her thesis.

Then Tara noticed that the crippled girl was beginning to move. Her legs slowly straightened, and her father gently lowered her to the floor, helping her stand. *My God!* Tara thought, *I can't believe this is happening.*

Those in the church were again singing praise songs to God as the little girl, now healed of the affliction that had left her crippled, walked down the center aisle of the church and looked right into the eyes of Tara. When she got to the bench where Tara was seated, she simply said, “Emmanuel,” and then turned and walked back up the aisle to her father.

Tara was terrified by what had happened—and by all the thoughts swirling through her head. Why would this young girl come up to her, of all the people in the church? How had her legs been restored? And what did *Emmanuel* mean? The religious study Tara had set out to do was producing more questions than answers. She was determined to understand what was going on.

She didn't dare tell a soul what she had witnessed in the church. But she certainly couldn't forget it. Later, when she arrived back home in Pakistan, she went to the only place she could think of to find some answers. She went to the blue Bible. This time Tara wasn't reading to pass a test; she was diligently searching for the truth. Each day she pored over the Scriptures, trying to understand the difference between the Bible and the Koran, and trying to find out why Muslims were so against Christians.

The Christians' God must be real, she thought. *How else would He hear them when they pray?*

BETRAYED

Finally Tara knew she had gone as far as she could on her own. She had to talk to someone. Instead of enlightening her, the religion course—and what she had witnessed in the church and

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read in the Bible—had created additional questions, and she desperately wanted to understand what was going on.

“Daddy, I’m going out with some friends,” Tara told her father as she prepared to leave. It was the first time in her sixteen years she had ever lied to her father, and guilt swept through her body as she hurried out of the family’s large, luxurious home. But she had to find out what the Christian faith was all about. And going back to a church was the only way she knew to do that.

She made her way across the city to a church and again slipped into a pew at the back of the sanctuary as the service was beginning. Afterward, she introduced herself to the man who had conducted the service and told him she hoped to ask him a few questions. The pastor agreed. Tara had assumed a church was a church, a Christian was a Christian, and any of them should be able to help her. Unfortunately, in this case, she was wrong.

The pastor grew a little uncomfortable with Tara’s many questions as she came week after week to talk with him. He was worried for his own safety and told her on more than one occasion that it might be better if she no longer came. “But where else can I go to find these answers?” Tara replied.

Her persistence won him over for a while, but finally the pastor felt the risk was too great. Thinking he would free himself from any future trouble, he met with Tara’s father and reported that she had been coming to his church and asking many questions about the Bible. Within a few minutes, he had betrayed a teenage Muslim girl who was seeking to know who God really was.

“What the hell did you think you were doing?!” Tara’s father screamed at his daughter when she arrived home that afternoon. “Do you have any idea what embarrassment you have brought upon me and this family? How could you possibly meet with that man? He is not a Muslim. He is a Christian! How stupid could you be? Are you now one of them?”

Tara was shocked at her father's rage; she had never seen that side of him. She tried to explain that she was just asking questions and didn't have any intention of converting to Christianity, but he wouldn't listen to her. He angrily ordered her away from his presence, and Tara ran from the room in tears. She had no idea what she had gotten herself into or how she would appease her father's wrath.

She also still had unanswered questions. Back in her room, despite the scene she had just endured, Tara found herself drawn back to the little blue leather-bound Book. Wiping away her tears, she opened the Bible and struggled to read as her father's furious tirade continued to echo loudly through her mind.

Gradually the ancient words drew her in, soothing her anxiety and encouraging her with God's love. She became so absorbed in her Scripture reading that she lost track of time and failed to notice that her father had stepped into her room. At first his countenance revealed a man who was sorry for yelling so viciously at his youngest daughter. But when he saw what she was reading, his repentant face turned to fury.

"You *are* a Christian! Now I know you are!" he screamed.

"Daddy, I promise, I'm not a Christian. I'm just curious. You have to believe me!"

"Don't lie to me! Why else would you be reading a Bible?"

"Please, Daddy! It's just a book I'm reading. You know I've been doing a lot of studying lately." Tara was trying desperately to convince him of her innocence when his hand came flying hard against her face.

"How could you do this to our family? We are Muslims!" She had retreated from him in shock and pain, her eyes wide in disbelief that he had struck her. Now he came after her and slapped her again. "We were born Muslim, and we will die Muslim. And you—you are no longer my daughter!"

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Tara's wailing sobs brought her oldest brother running to her room to find out what was going on. "Your sister has become a Christian! She has been visiting with a pastor, and now I find her reading a Bible!"

Hearing the accusation, Tara's brother changed instantly from concern to fury, and he swung at Tara, joining his father in beating her. His eye fell on the blue Bible, and he viciously began tearing its gold-edged pages. Tara's father found a cloth belt, folded it in two, and swung it wildly across Tara's face and back as she covered on the floor, sobbing hysterically.

"Father, you need to find her a husband. And do it quickly before this goes any further," her brother said, his face red from anger and exertion. As the two men finally left the room, her father was nodding his head.

"EMMANUEL, EMMANUEL"

As Tara lay crying in the middle of the floor, she uttered her first prayer: "God, I do not know what my father and brother are talking about. I am not a Christian; I am a Muslim. But now I do not know which way I should go. Please. Just show me, and I will follow."

Tara felt strangely peaceful after she prayed and, lying there on the floor, she fell into a deep sleep. After a while she felt someone lifting her head and softly caressing her cheek. She could hear a voice; it sounded like someone in the background was moving toward her. The voice was saying, "Emmanuel, Emmanuel." Tara sat up quickly and looked around her room, only to find it empty. As she recalled the strange dream—it *was* a dream, wasn't it?—she tried repeating the bizarre word she had just now heard for the second time: "Emmanuel."

Tara lay on her bed, thinking again about the incident in Iran.

“What does it mean?” she wondered aloud. “And why do I keep hearing this word?”

She touched her face tenderly, wincing from the pain. In all her life, her father had never hit her, and Tara was devastated by his anger and his willingness to beat her. She and her father had always been so close. But now she knew they would never be close again. She knew the rage in her father would not be easily restrained.

And neither would her own stubborn search for the truth.

A few days later, Tara’s father sat down with his daughter, her face still bruised from the beating. Again he approached her with a sorrowful look in his eyes. “Tara, I am very sorry for what I did to you,” he said. “It is shameful for a father to beat his daughter. You must understand that I did not mean to hurt you. This impression that you gave me was simply more than I could bear. Please forgive me.”

Tara sat quietly, not allowing herself to fully trust her father’s newfound tenderness. “I know now is the time,” he continued, “that you should be married.”

Tara remembered what her brother had said after the beating. But she was only sixteen and had no intention of getting married. “Daddy, I am too young to get married. I want to finish my studies.” She tried to sound calm.

Her father stood up, his voice a little firmer. “I said it would be best if you got married. It is not a suggestion.”

Tara shivered at the growing coldness in his voice, but she wasn’t willing to give in that easily. “No, Daddy, I don’t want to. I am so young, and I want to finish my education first. I don’t want an arranged marriage, Daddy! Who is he? What is his name? What is his religion?”

The words slipped out before she realized what she was saying. It was a stupid thing for a Muslim girl to say. For their

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family, there was only one religion: Islam. Her father, infuriated again, screamed, “What do you mean, what is his religion? We are only one religion here! We are Muslim!” He grabbed her arm and jerked her closer so he was glaring straight into her eyes. “You are a Christian! You are! Now I know it for sure!”

Before Tara could offer a word in her defense, she again felt her father’s swift, hard hand against her face. He was firmly convinced that his daughter had converted to Christianity, and in response, he did what he thought was his duty.

Coming into the room just as another blow fell on Tara’s face, one of her sisters screamed out in shock and fear.

Unmoved by the pleas of family members or servants who happened to be nearby, Tara’s father and brother dragged her into her room and locked the door behind them. Shrinking back into a corner and trembling in terror, Tara had good reason to fear for her life.

Her father and brother beat her with whatever weapons they found quickest: the electric cord from one of the crystal lamps and the rod from Tara’s closet. Then they grabbed, pushed, and carried all her belongings—her rugs, bed, clothes, electronics, everything—and dumped them in the hallway. When the terrible scene ended, Tara lay in a bloody heap in the middle of her now-barren room. Her father’s last words to her before he slammed the door shut were, “Either you marry, or you die. Your choice. If you are a Christian, then there is no place for you in this city. But if you marry, then you can be my daughter. Otherwise you will die here alone.”

RUNNING AWAY

Tara lay on the cold tile floor, drifting in and out of consciousness. No one was allowed to help her. Her family thought she

would surely come to her senses if left alone with no food or medical aid. On the third day, Tara started to sit up, but a pool of dried blood caused her hair to stick to the floor. Dazed but trying to grasp all that had happened, she felt a wave of nausea and sadness wash over her as she inspected her wounds. She never could have imagined that her search for God would bring her to such a terrible place. But now she had only one thought, to escape for her life. Having never before spent even one day away from her family, she had no idea what to do, but it didn't matter. She knew she had to go.

She struggled to her closet to see if anything was left and found the one thing they had missed, a small travel bag from her last trip to Iran. In it were a few clothes, a little money, plus some jewelry and her passport. Tara quietly changed her bloody clothes, grimacing with pain at every movement. When she was ready, she stood in the middle of her room and looked around one last time. She knew if she left she could never come home again. In her culture running away was almost as bad as being a Christian, and she knew her family would never be able to accept the humiliation. If they caught her, they would kill her now, for sure.

With a heavy heart, she snuck out her bedroom window and discreetly made her way to the bus station. Tara was sore, stiff, and heartbroken, and the only thing that kept her going was the fear of what her father or brother would do if they found her—and the hunger in her heart to know more about the Christian God. When she reached the bus terminal, she bought a one-way ticket to a city several hours away, a place she was vaguely familiar with. She had been there a few times with her family, and she planned to seek refuge in a church she had seen there. Surely any Christian person there would help her, she thought.

The bus ride was long, and people stared at and whispered about the bloodied teenager. As an attractive girl from a prominent

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family, Tara cringed with humiliation, knowing what her fellow passengers must be thinking. It was a new experience for her, and she only hoped her quest for God was worth all she had given up. As she tried to avoid the glaring eyes around her, she also hoped these strangers wouldn't turn her in to the police. Women in her country have few rights and are seldom seen out in public without a male family member.

When the bus finally arrived at the intended destination, Tara quickly got off and tried to blend in with the crowd, not an easy thing to do in her bruised and bloody state, but she thought that as soon as she got to the church, she could clean up.

When she arrived at the church, she was met by a Salvation Army officer standing outside the door. Surprisingly, the man tried to dissuade Tara from seeking help there. "If I were you, I wouldn't want to be alone with the leader of this church. There have been rumors," he said.

Tara was on the verge of tears. "What is this?" she asked. "I thought a Christian was a Christian, and now you're telling me this church isn't good for me? Is this what I left home for?"

"Come home with me," the man said kindly. "I can help you and protect you."

Although Tara had great misgivings about going to the man's home, she seemed to have no other choice. Reluctantly, she went with him. It turned out he had a wife and two sons, and everyone in the family treated her kindly—for about two weeks. Then family rumors started flying; the wife suspected maybe her husband wanted to have an affair with their pretty young guest. Finally, Tara couldn't take the tension any longer; she asked the man to take her somewhere else. "You must know someone in another city who could help me," she begged. "Just take me there, please, and I'll find a job. I appreciate your help, but I don't want to cause any more trouble for your family."

“I do know of a man who might help you. He is actually from your hometown,” the Salvation Army man said.

Tara was overcome by fear when she heard his words. “I don’t think that’s a good idea,” she said. “Please, my father doesn’t know where I am—and I don’t *want* him to know. Please don’t do this to me.”

“Don’t worry,” the man assured her. “I know this man. He will help you.”

THE DISOWNED UNCLE

With her options quickly expiring, Tara agreed to meet with the man. But the first time she saw him, waiting at the prearranged spot, she almost fainted. “That’s my father! You tricked me!” she screamed.

“No, it is not your father. I promise,” the man said. “Go in and meet him.”

To Tara’s utter amazement, she discovered the man was actually an uncle she had never met, a man who had an uncanny resemblance to her father. “Why didn’t my father ever tell us about you?” Tara asked him.

“I became a Christian in 1952, before Sharia law came into effect,” explained her uncle, referring to the country’s adoption of the Islamic code. “Back then it was legal to convert, but it wasn’t socially acceptable. Your father disowned me. Since then I have been working here as a pastor. Now I see that God has sent you here. Don’t worry. I’ll take care of you; you can be my daughter.”

Relief flooded over Tara; she began to feel a tendril of hope growing within her; maybe she could settle down, get a job, and continue her schooling.

She soon learned that her uncle was a kind, generous man, and she quickly grew to love and admire him. He spent long

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hours talking to Tara about Christianity, and he answered all her questions. He even explained what *Emmanuel* meant. After a couple of months living in her uncle's home and studying with him, Tara felt she had a solid understanding of who Jesus was, and she finally prayed, asking God to forgive all her sins, and she gave her heart completely to Him.

Tara's search for God was paying off, but her trials were just beginning . . .

Trouble started again when Tara's uncle received a visit one day from a cousin who thought he recognized Tara. "Oh no," her uncle assured him. "She's just a friend who's visiting awhile."

But the cousin was not convinced, and when he returned home he called Tara's father and told him he thought the girl staying with his cousin was Tara.

Just a few days later, Tara was working in her uncle's kitchen when she heard hurried footsteps coming from the front room. Tara headed that direction and nearly collided with her uncle as he burst into the kitchen, waving his arms frantically, "It's your father! He's coming. You must go—right now! Leave! Go to my friends' farm outside of town, the one I told you about. Here's some money; now *run!* And don't worry. I won't tell your father anything. I'll check on you in a few days."

Tara's father and brother were literally on the front doorstep when she flew out the back door. She didn't have time to think, only to run. Pure adrenaline kept her going as she ran as fast as she could. She fumbled in her pocket for the address her uncle had made her carry with her constantly, just in case something like this ever happened. Out of breath and in pain, Tara finally reached the main street and slowed to a brisk walk. In this busy part of town, she didn't want to arouse suspicion. After hailing a taxi, she slouched in the seat and closed her eyes. She couldn't believe she was on the run again after only two short months with her

newfound uncle. But even though the adrenaline rush of having to run so quickly had caused her heart to pound wildly in her chest, Tara felt a strange sense of calm creeping through her. She prayed silently for her dad and brother, and she prayed they wouldn't give her uncle too much grief.

Tara ended up staying at the farm ten days while things settled down back in the city. Finally her uncle came to see her, and Tara was eager to go back home with him. But when she saw the look on her uncle's face, her heart fell. "What's wrong, Uncle?" she asked.

"Tara, you know how much I have enjoyed having you these past two months," he began, his eyes never leaving her face. "It felt like God gave me the daughter I always longed for—in both blood and in spirit. But you can't come back with me. It's just too dangerous. I'm sorry to be the one to have to tell you this, but your father said you have to die. He said it was a matter of honor for him and his family."

Tara knew her uncle was telling her the truth. She knew her father and brothers would never stop looking for her—and she had no doubt about what would happen if they ever caught her. She felt pangs of self-pity trying to cloud her mind, but the sadness in her uncle's eyes tugged at her heart, helping her move her focus away from herself and onto him and his misery.

"Uncle, please don't be sorry," she said, clutching his hand. "I am the one who should be sorry for causing you so much trouble. I am so thankful God led me to you. You gave me the answers I was looking for, and now I have peace like I have never experienced before. I can never repay you for that."

It was a tearful good-bye as Tara prepared to once again be shuttled off to a new home. Her uncle had made arrangements for her to live with a family he knew in a distant city. She tried to hide her worries from her uncle as they parted. But inside, she wondered if she would ever be able to stop running . . .

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A PRISONER OF REFUGE

Tara was welcomed into her new home with open arms. The family was composed of a local pastor, his wife, and their three sons. The boys immediately adopted Tara as their new sister. The oldest son, Rubin, especially admired Tara for her courage.

To protect her from her father and brothers, who continued their relentless pursuit of her, Tara's new family asked her to remain in her room most of the time. She was there throughout the day and in the evenings whenever anyone was visiting (which, with the husband and father being a pastor, was nearly all the time).

Tara's room was divided into two parts: one for sleeping, the other for sitting and studying. The two sections combined were less than half the size of the bedroom she had grown up in. Tara was relieved to be staying with a family she could trust, but the confinement was getting to her. She knew she couldn't take it much longer.

"Please, let me come out of my room," Tara pleaded one morning. "I know you are trying to keep me safe, but I feel like a prisoner. This is no way to live."

The pastor wanted to let Tara roam free, but he knew her father and brother were still looking for her. In fact, they had come through town asking questions and revealing their intentions to kill her.

"Tara, just a little while longer, then we can let you out," he told her. "Please bear with us. It's for your own good."

Tara knew she had no choice. If she was seen in public, she would endanger not only herself but her adopted family as well. She tried to make good use of her time studying, but there were many days when all she could do was cry. Her small room would remain her home for an entire year.

Finally one evening Tara overheard the pastor speaking about

the church needing a new secretary. When he came into Tara's room the next day, she pleaded for the job. "Please, Pastor," she begged, "please let me have this job! I have been typing your sermons for you all this time; I know I can do the job. It has been a year since I came. Surely my father and brother have moved on."

The pastor was uneasy about the decision, but he knew he couldn't keep Tara in her room forever. He agreed to ask the church's senior pastor if he was willing to give the job to Tara.

The following week, Tara was the church secretary. "Tara, listen very closely," the pastor instructed. "You are my niece visiting from another town. Please stop referring to me as 'Pastor.' From now on, you must call me 'Uncle,' and we will call you 'Rebecca.' Do not tell your story to anyone. Do you understand?"

Tara not only understood, she was delighted.

She excelled at her new job. She had studied English, and the senior pastor, who was British, took an immediate liking to her. She was given oversight over the church finances and even began to teach a Sunday school class.

The senior pastor, knowing of Tara's prior situation, also allowed her to minister one on one with secret Muslim converts. Tara began to feel that this work would be the heart of her ministry, and she thanked God for allowing her to experience similar trials as these converts, who couldn't help but be encouraged by her incredible testimony.

Six months after starting her new job, Tara was secretly baptized in a small cistern in the church basement. Only her adopted family, the senior pastor, and her uncle were allowed to attend.

THE PASSION TO EVANGELIZE

After spending two years with her new family, Tara was eighteen years old and longing to get out and do more ministry. She was

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happy with her job as church secretary, but she had a longing to evangelize. Most of the mission workers had been born into a Christian home, but Tara could speak to Muslims as a former Muslim herself. Tara had survived the brutality of her father and brothers, and she had been ostracized from her family. She had a testimony to share, and she knew others would listen to her.

“Please, Rubin! Please let me go with you,” she begged one day as the pastor’s oldest son prepared to leave on an evangelizing trip.

“No, Tara,” he said, hating to refuse her because he knew how passionately she wanted to evangelize. “It’s just too dangerous. Someone will get offended by your testimony and report you to the authorities. I may be arrested, but if you’re caught you will surely be killed.”

Rubin had grown to love Tara like a sister, and he couldn’t bear to endanger her. But he knew she would insist on coming with him—and he was right. She had her argument ready. “Rubin, what is more important,” she demanded, “my safety or the lost souls you are trying to reach?”

Rubin admitted defeat, and Tara began traveling with him as he taught her the art of evangelism.

Another two and a half years rolled by without any trouble. Tara had settled into her new life as the pastor’s niece, and she had completed part of her college studies. She had also found a new role in arranging secret baptisms for former Muslims and Hindus. Most were the result of her and Rubin’s evangelical outreach work. She also helped start a literacy program and a children’s ministry.

Tara always remained on guard, but after all this time she was finally feeling that she had settled into a life far away from the threats of her father and brothers. Her only troubles came from a few church members who refused to believe Tara was the pastor’s niece and who were jealous of her growing ministry alongside the church leadership. It was a problem she could handle. The

[Tara: Life on the Run]

problem she couldn't handle was waiting outside the church one bright Sunday afternoon as Tara walked out the door.

RUNNING AGAIN

Tara recognized him immediately; he was her cousin. Every muscle in her body tensed as the young man tried to stare directly into her eyes, but Tara was determined to walk past him without giving any indication she knew who he was.

"Wait! I want to speak with you," he called after her.

Tara knew by the tone in his voice that he wasn't positive of her identity. She had been gone more than four years and had changed considerably. She simply ignored his request as though she hadn't heard him and continued on by him. Then she heard the word she had dreaded most . . .

"Tara!"

Tara turned and answered with false courtesy, "Oh, hello. Are you talking to me? My name is Rebecca. I don't believe I know you. I hope you'll excuse me; I'm in a bit of a hurry."

If Tara's face didn't give her away, her voice did. She knew her cousin had found what he was looking for. Now it would only be a matter of hours before her father and brother showed up. She felt panic welling up inside her heart as she quickly continued on her way and tried to get lost in the small crowd of people bustling about. Her heart was pounding so hard she thought it would burst through her chest.

Out on the busy street Tara grabbed a taxi. "To the airport, please," she said. She had money in her purse but no idea where she would go. Once again she was running out of options; she only wanted to get away before her brother or father found her. At the airport she scanned the outbound flight board, desperately trying to decide where to go. She ended up flying to a city in the

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eastern part of the country; she thought she would be out of danger there, at least for the moment. She had no idea where to go once she landed, and she ended up spending a long, difficult night at the airport. She had phoned Rubin so her adopted family wouldn't worry. But other than that, she could only sit alone with her thoughts and memories and try to calm herself with silent prayer. She resisted the urge to ask God, "Why me?" But she was tired of living as a fugitive, and she wondered if she would ever in her life feel safe and securely settled.

The next day, exhausted and emotionally drained, Tara returned to her adopted family. She felt bad for them. They had given her so much love and support, and by helping her they had put themselves and the whole church community at risk. Now Rubin told her he was trying to get her a visa so she could leave the country. Tara was apprehensive but also a little relieved as she thought about leaving. At least in another country she wouldn't have to carry the burden of getting her dear friends in trouble. And not only her friends. She knew if she was caught the government could use the whole incident to create a huge scandal for the entire Christian community in Pakistan. Yes, it would be best if she left.

Tara assumed that if she lay low for a while she would be safe. But two church members who were jealous of the attention Tara received from the pastor's family decided to take matters into their own hands. They called the CID, Pakistan's intelligence service, and reported that a young woman in the church was actively evangelizing.

THE APOSTATE DAUGHTER

Tara was summoned to the CID office, where she was told the agency would be opening a file on her and gathering information to see if the allegations were true. The agents also wanted to

contact her family. Tara couldn't believe she had escaped so many times only to be turned in by one of the church members. She knew most of the congregation members were kindhearted, and she understood that it was necessary for her to keep silent about her past. But it only took one or two to turn the tide. Now she felt like she was caught in an undercurrent pulling her down so deep she would never recover.

Tara cried out to God to save her one more time. The word *Emmanuel* came into her mind. She now knew it meant that God was with her, and that thought was enough. She believed if God could make a fish spit Jonah onto the shore, He could get Tara out of the mouth of the CID!

But it wasn't going to be easy. The CID confiscated Tara's passport and continued asking questions and filling out forms. Rubin was usually with her and tried to convince the CID that she was his sister, but they weren't buying it. The names on the passports didn't match. Tara's passport also identified her as a Muslim. So what was she doing with a Christian family?

After spending a full day in CID custody, Tara was allowed to return home—but not before a warning not to leave town. The agency would be contacting her soon. Tara needed a sign from God, needed something to hang on to. She was now without a passport, and it was only a matter of time before the CID connected her with her true family—a turn of events that would be the end of her. Sometimes she wondered what method her father would use to kill her . . .

On the way out the door of the CID office, one of the officers whispered to Tara. He knew her family but hadn't spoken up, knowing the danger she was in. "Tara, listen to me," he said. "I am a friend of one of your cousins. I know who you are. You must leave the country as quickly as possible. It is not only you who is in danger."

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Tara was surprised but also relieved. It was a miracle the CID officer hadn't turned her in. But not only had he kept her secret, he also had confirmed what she must now do. She must leave Pakistan. But how? She had no passport. And even if she had one, where would she go?

Rubin immediately went from one foreign embassy to another trying to get her a visa. He was repeatedly turned down. The embassies said she had to have a connection in their country, someone who could sponsor her. Finally a country in the Middle East offered a three-month visa for one thousand American dollars. Tara wasn't excited about traveling to another Muslim nation, but once again she lacked any other options. The same day she paid the money, she learned that the CID was preparing a warrant for her arrest. Its agents had discovered that she was arranging baptisms for former Muslims and that she herself had converted to Christianity from Islam. She had been labeled an apostate. Tara also learned that her parents had filed charges against her as well. They confirmed her conversion, and in accordance with Islamic law, they had personally recommended that she be hanged.

Falling deeper into despair, Tara began locking herself in her room for days on end. She expected that any day her family would catch her and kill her. Worse, they might kill her new family, too. And it would be because of her. Her prayers became shorter but always contained a passionate cry to God not to leave her, to be her Emmanuel, even if it was while she stood before a noose.

“GOD MUST HAVE QUITE A JOB FOR YOU”

While Tara was losing hope, Rubin was busy trying to secure a new passport and identification papers to go with the visa they had obtained. He made Tara cut her hair short and wear

sunglasses for the picture, and he had a document forged to say she was extremely sick and could not travel to the government office to get her documents. On Easter Sunday 1996, Rubin walked into Tara's room with the good news: "Tara, I have all your travel documents. Happy Easter!"

"I can't believe it!" Tara exclaimed. "How did you do it? And how much did it cost you?"

"Never mind that," he answered, smiling widely. "I told you God would come through. He hasn't brought you this far to be handed over to the CID. He must have quite a job for you to do, Tara, especially considering all the trouble you've been." His brilliant smile told her he was glad to have been part of that "trouble."

Tara was humbled by his faith and perseverance. He had been more than a brother; he had been a friend in a time of need, and he had never let her down. With those thoughts, a new sadness came over Tara, the sorrow in parting from her Christian family and all the church projects she had been able to serve in.

"I have one more request before I leave," she said. "I want to take part in the baptism we have been planning for the new converts."

Rubin was about to say no, but the truth was, he was too worn out to argue with Tara. And he knew who would win anyway. "Sure," he said, shrugging and smiling, "but you must leave immediately after."

The following night, Tara attended the secret baptism. She knew each of the six converts, and each knew Tara's incredible story. Tara knew she could trust them. They were all in the same boat.

Some of the converts were from Pakistan, but most were from other countries. One was from China, another was from Afghanistan, and two others were from Iran and Iraq. It wasn't uncommon for converts to be traveling through Pakistan from foreign lands.

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Tara marveled at how God had used her. She would be leaving the country the following day because of her faith while others had come to her country and found faith. And most of the Christians in her community, including those in her own church, never even knew what was happening. It was hard to trust those who clung so tightly to their own safety.

BETRAYED AGAIN

Tara left the challenges of Pakistan only to be thrust into a new set of trials. She was free, for the time being, from her family's pursuit, but she had to be careful not to give away her identity. Even in another country there was the constant risk of being arrested by the Islamic police and exported back to Pakistan. And if she was ever returned to Pakistan, she would be handed directly into the hands of her father. Her fate would be sealed.

Tara also faced another challenge. In the Muslim world, a woman is expected to marry before the age of twenty-five. If she doesn't, she is assumed to be a prostitute and is usually detained, re-educated, and designated for an arranged marriage. Tara had no desire to get married, at least not with her life in such disarray, and she certainly had no desire for a marriage arranged by Islamic officials. And on top of all this, she was now without the support of her adoptive family and had only a three-month visa.

She quickly realized that focusing on the reality of her situation would only serve to destroy the hope she carried. *I have lost everything*, she kept telling herself, *but I have found God—a minor loss for such a great discovery. Emmanuel—God is with me. Who can ultimately be against me? I have gained more than I can ever lose. Emmanuel. God be with me.* It became her prayer, one that carried her, one more time, to hell and back . . .

Rubin had arranged for her to get a part-time job as a church

secretary in her new country, but it provided barely enough money to pay for food, let alone rent. She was also working part-time cooking for the pastor's wife, who spoke more of jewelry and fashion than of Christ. Tara began to wonder if this was the faith she was risking her life for, and she again grew restless. She now found herself battling depression while hopelessness tugged at her soul.

She eventually got another job working for a clothing designer and became eligible to apply for a three-year residency permit. One problem solved, but a greater one was coming.

With her residency permit secured in her new country, Tara began volunteering in some of the church's outreaches. Making new friends was easy for Tara; knowing which ones to trust proved a little more difficult.

Although Tara didn't realize it at the time, one of her new friends was a man who worked for a Pakistani Christian magazine. He knew, from contacts he had in Pakistan, that Tara was not who she claimed to be. Wanting to "get the story," he approached Tara one day after church. "Tara, I know it must be very difficult for you here in a foreign country, with a new language and no family," he said. "Why don't you come to our house for fellowship and a warm meal? Let us help you."

Tara agreed. *It will be nice to make new friends*, she told herself.

For their first few visits, the reporter was true to his word. He invited Tara and a few other Christians her age to his house to share an afternoon of food and fellowship. However, with each visit, the reporter began asking Tara more questions—specific questions—about her past.

"Please, I'd rather not talk about myself," she answered politely, not wanting to offend her new friend. When the next invitation came, Tara declined.

Not ready to give up so easily, the reporter called Tara the next day. "Tara, I know you're having financial difficulties here, and

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my friends and I really want to help,” he told her. “Please come over and share your testimony with us, and we will raise some money for you. We’re your friends. You can trust us.”

Tara reluctantly agreed. At that point, the only Christians who really knew her complete story were her adoptive family in Pakistan. She had been very careful not to let anyone know who she was. Keeping her identity secret was a matter of life and death.

A month went by, and Tara had conducted a number of interviews with other reporters. Each time, those who interviewed her showed compassion and promised to do what they could to help. Another month went by with more interviews, more tears, but still no money. Tara began to wonder what was going on. Finally a lady called one day and asked Tara how much money she was getting from the bank each month.

“What are you talking about? I don’t have a bank account. And the bank certainly hasn’t sent me any money. Why would a bank do that?” Tara asked the woman.

“Oh, there must be some mistake,” the woman said. “People have been sending money to this account, believing it was for you. From what I understand, it has grown into a fairly large amount.”

Tara had been used; she confirmed the awful truth. A business had been set up, and others were profiting from her testimony. Soon afterward she saw the magazine. The cover story featured a teenage Muslim girl who had miraculously found Christ and was on the run from her own family, who wanted her dead. The story contained her name! Tara couldn’t believe her eyes.

“How could this happen?” she gasped. And more importantly, she worried, “How will I keep my family from finding out about me?”

Tara was reaching her limit. She was wondering how much more of this deception and subterfuge she could take, when another man from the church caught up to her as she was leaving

the Sunday morning service. It was the same story: "Share your testimony with us," he said, "and we can raise money to help you." But this man presented an appeal with a twist. He said he thought Tara was very beautiful, and he suspected she must be lonely.

That was it. Tara drew back her hand and slapped the man across the face. "You have a wife and a daughter!" she scolded him. "You are a Christian! How can you go on like that?"

The man was completely taken aback by Tara's aggression. He put his hand on the side of his now-reddening face and growled, "You will pay for this." He didn't dare make a bigger scene because there were people on the street not too far away.

"Fine," Tara replied, still fuming at the man's suggestion. "You tell me how much I have to pay, and I will pay. Just stay away from me!"

The only problem was, it wasn't money he had in mind.

Three nights later, a brick came crashing through the window of Tara's small apartment. Tara could hear men shouting on the street below, but she couldn't tell what they were saying because they were speaking a broken Arabic she couldn't understand. She peeked from behind the curtains as the men picked up more stones from the street. They hurled them at her windows again, finishing off any glass still attached to the frame. Now she could make out a few words they were saying: "Muslim . . . now a Christian! . . . an apostate! Police! Call the police . . ."

She peeked around the curtain again just in time to see the men jump into taxis and speed away. She had recognized two of them. They were friends of the man she slapped.

Tara prayed their threats to call the police were just bluffs, an attempt to scare her. Well, if it was a bluff, it was working. She was scared. But it wasn't a bluff. A few hours later, the police were at her door asking what had happened. They took Tara to the police station.

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GIVING IT ALL TO GOD

“We have reports that you are a Muslim and that you have converted to Christianity—and you are also single,” the questions began. Tara knew the police could easily trace her back to her father in Pakistan and access the file on her there. She gave short, elusive answers, repeating a single word to herself between each question: *Emmanuel*.

After a few hours, the police let her go but promised to keep an eye on her. They kept asking why she wasn’t married, and they strongly suggested she find a husband. They even offered a particular man who they knew would take her.

Amazingly, Tara had quickly gone from being a victim whose apartment had been attacked to becoming an accused person. Such are the “rights” of a Christian in a Muslim land.

A HUSBAND FOR TARA

The next four months went by without any major incidents. Tara excelled as a clothing designer and become more active in church programs. She was also able to help other Muslim converts who were on the run, fitting work for Tara, who now had more than ten years of practical experience in the field. Still, she knew the man she’d slapped was not satisfied with the way the initial problems he had instigated had been resolved. He wanted more. Tara could tell by the way he looked at her. He wanted either to have Tara or to destroy her.

For Tara, neither was an option.

Tara was sitting in her apartment when the phone rang. It was that same man, and he had news. He was proud to announce that he had written an article and posted it on the church bulletin board. The article claimed that Tara was a prostitute. That’s why she wore such nice clothes and was still single. He invited her to come view his handiwork.

Furious, Tara slammed down the phone. This man was not going to give up. She wasn't really worried what the church members thought. Those who knew her would know the truth. She couldn't marry because of the continual danger she was in; the nice clothes were samples of her own designs. The real problem would be with the police; it was only a matter of time before the report made it to them. They had basically told her to marry, and this article would only fuel their position. When they found out, she would be brought in.

A week later, Tara's fears were realized. She was placed in an Islamic detention center where she was to be re-educated in the teachings of Islam and ultimately married off to a Muslim man. Confined to a small room, Tara quietly prayed. She had no idea how she would manage to leave the detention center without agreeing to marry. Now it seemed that everything had come full circle. Her father had wanted her to marry and was willing to kill her if she refused. It wouldn't be much different with the detention center. If Tara couldn't be "rehabilitated," she would be returned to her parents in Pakistan. But Tara had refused her father's plan for her, and she wasn't about to give in to the center officials. Without any further options, she prayed, giving it all to God.

Nearly three months went by. Tara was subjected to daily lessons on the Koran. When not in class, she was a prisoner to her own room. Finally one day an official broke the monotony with an announcement: "Tara, you have a visitor."

"How can I have a visitor? No one even knows I'm here."

"He says he wants to speak with you. We think it would be a good idea if you go with him."

"Go with him?" Tara questioned. "I don't even know this man, and you are sending me out with him?" Tara was obviously upset, believing it was another trick to marry her off. However, the man promised he would have her back after lunch. Tara

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wasn't happy with the idea, although it would be nice to get out of her room. She decided she would go, but she would ignore the man during lunch.

The man was Tara's age, handsome, and he spoke with a quiet, gentle voice. "Tara, I know who you are," he told her. "I learned about you from a Muslim friend." Tara tried to ignore him. But the more he talked, the more he got her attention.

"I am also a Christian," he said, his voice continuing its low, mellow tone. "But no one knows. I fled from Pakistan just like you did. Actually, I came from the same city. I also know that the center has arranged for you to marry a Muslim man who already has three wives."

Tara cringed. She had already been told of the plan. She tried to act completely disinterested in what the man was saying, and she almost succeeded, until he told her, "If you refuse, you will be deported back to Pakistan—back to your father."

Tara didn't know what to believe. How could the center have arranged for a single Christian man from her hometown to have a meeting with her?

"So what do you want?" Tara finally asked.

"I want to marry you," he said.

A MIRACLE IN THE FLESH

When Tara returned to the detention center, three officials were waiting for her. "We've made a decision, Tara," one of them said. "You are to marry Zahid. He already has three wives, and he is willing to take you, too. He is a good man. We will make all the arrangements. You don't have to worry about anything. But if you refuse, you will be deported back to Pakistan."

That was it: the moment of decision. She hadn't answered her lunch date when he had proposed to her. It was all too much to

comprehend. Everything was happening too fast, and she needed time to think. Time to pray. She longed to speak with her adoptive family—with anyone who knew the whole story, anyone who could give her advice.

“I will not marry Zahid,” Tara answered to the surprise of the officials.

“Then you can pack your bags. You are going back to Pakistan.”

“I will pack my bags, but for another reason. I am getting married. Just not to Zahid. I’m marrying the man who took me to lunch,” Tara answered.

The officials were surprised but agreeable. Anything to bring this young woman under control.

Tara contacted the man she had shared lunch with and told him the news. She would marry him. She was still unsure if his motives were true, so it was a risk. Not as big a risk as marrying Zahid would be, however. She knew where he stood.

The decision made, Tara cried out again to Emmanuel, the God who had brought her this far. She was nearly twenty-seven years old, and she had been on the run for more than ten years. If her husband-to-be had deceived her, she knew the problems she would face. But if he was sincere, he was a miracle in the flesh. He would allow her to escape the detention center and the continued rumors of her prostitution. She would even have a helper in her work of ministry to others who had secretly converted from Islam. But was she just setting herself up for another fall? There were just too many questions.

Finally Tara remembered the prayer she had prayed when she entered the detention center. She had given it all to God. And she did so again. It was out of her hands now. “Emmanuel, God with us,” she prayed, “be with both of us.”

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EPILOGUE

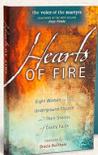
The man Tara married turned out to be that miracle in the flesh. A committed Christian, he has served alongside Tara in her continued ministry to others who have converted to Christianity from Islam.

He and Tara now have a baby boy, James, and they are still on the run. She and her husband are continually watched by the detention center officials. She is frequently brought in and questioned about her activities. “Who comes over for lunch?” the officials might ask. “Why did that woman stay at your house last night?” “Why were you gone for four hours today?”

For Tara, life is a constant game of cat and mouse.

Her biggest challenges may still be ahead. In a few years, when her son is old enough to speak, he undoubtedly will also be questioned by the Islamic officials. Another challenge is much closer at hand. Just a few months before being interviewed for *Hearts of Fire*, Tara was spotted by another one of her cousins who has been employed to find her so that she can be returned to her father and “justice” can be done.

For Tara’s protection, nothing more can be said of where she lives, nor can details be given of her Christian activities. But one thing is sure: She lives a world apart from most Christians. For the most part even those in her own church remain ignorant of her life as a converted Muslim, of the risks she faces each day. Perhaps it is not possible for them to comprehend. Perhaps that’s why God needs those like Tara who can light the way for other apostate sons and daughters to follow.



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