

TERRI
BLACKSTOCK

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THOMAS NELSON

Since 1798
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Taylor Reid's phone flashed as she snapped the selfie with her two friends, their heads touching and their backs to the stage. The shot from the third row, with the lead singer in the background and the three of them in the foreground, was perfect. No one would believe their seats were so close.

They turned around to face the band, dancing to the beat of the song they'd been listening to in the car on the way to Trudeau Hall.

Taylor quickly posted the pic, typing, "Ed Loran targets nonpoliticals for his rally with band Blue Fire. Worked on us!"

She put her phone on videotape and zoomed onto the stage.

"I don't want it to end!" Desiree said in her ear.

"Me either!" Taylor yelled over the music.

"Maybe they'll play again after his speech," Mara shouted.

The song came to an end, and the crowd went crazy, begging for one more song before the band left the stage.

But an amplified voice filled the auditorium, cutting off the

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adulation. “Ladies and gentlemen, please welcome the next president of the United States, Ed Loran!”

The crowd sounded less enthusiastic as the band left the stage and Ed Loran, the Libertarian celebrity magnet, made his entrance. Taylor kept cheering and clapping, letting her enthusiasm for the band segue to him.

It happened just as the candidate took the stage. The deafening sound, like some confusing combination of gunshot and lightning bolt, a blast that blacked out the lights and knocked her to the ground. Smoke mushroomed. Screams crescendoed—shrieks of terror, wailing pain, shocking anguish . . . then sudden, gentle silence, as if she were underwater. A loud ringing in her ears filled the void.

She peered under the seats, choking for breath as dimmer lights flickered through the smoke. Even from here, she could see the fallout of whatever had happened. Blood pooling on the ground, people hunkering down as she was, feet running . . . What was happening? An explosion? A crash? She looked around and couldn't see her friends.

She clawed her way up and looked over the seat. Smoke and fire billowed from the stage into the crowd, and heat wafted over her like some living force invading the room. Muffled, muted sounds competed with the ringing.

Get out! Now! She dropped back down and crawled under two rows of seats until she came to someone limp on the floor. She felt herself scream but couldn't hear her own voice. Scrambling to her feet, she went to her left to get to the aisle, but her foot slipped on something wet. She grabbed the seat next to her to steady herself, then launched into the frantic crowd in the aisle. The room seemed to spin, people whizzing by, people under her,

people above her, people broken and ripped and still . . . She stepped and fell, crawled and ran, tripped and kicked her way to the bottlenecked doorway, then fought her way through it.

The ringing in her ears faded as she tumbled downstairs, almost falling into the lobby below. The sound of crying, coughing, wretching, and the roaring sound of pounding feet turned up as if some divine finger had fiddled with the volume.

She set her sights on the glass doors to the outside and pushed forward, moving through people and past the security stations they'd stopped at on the way in. She made it to the door and burst out into the sunlight.

Fresh, cool air hit her like freedom, but at first her lungs rejected it like some poison meant to stop her. At the bottom of the steps, on the sidewalk, she bent over and coughed until she could breathe.

After a moment, the crowd pushed her along toward the parking garage until she remembered that her car wasn't there. She had parked on the street, blocks away. She forced her way out of the flow of people and ran a block south. Where was it?

She turned the corner. Her car was here, on this block. Near the Atlanta Trust Bank. Wasn't it? Or was it the next block?

Sweat slicked her skin until she found her silver Accord. There!

She ran to it and pulled her keys out of her pocket, wishing she hadn't lost the key fob. Her hands trembled as she stuck the key into the passenger side lock and got the door open. She slipped inside on the driver's side, locked it behind her. Instinctively, she slid down, her head hidden as if someone were coming after her.

What just happened?

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One minute they'd been taking selfies and videotaping the band, and the next they were on the floor . . .

Where were Mara and Desiree? She hadn't even looked for them! Should she go back for them?

No, that would be insane. She could smell the smoke and fire from here. They would know to come to the car when they got out.

Call the police!

She tried to steady her hands as she swiped her phone on.

"911, what is your—"

"An explosion!" she cut in, her voice hoarse. "At the Ed Loran rally at Trudeau Hall!"

"Where are you now?" the woman asked in a voice that was robotically calm.

"I got out. There's fire . . . People are still in there. Please send ambulances!"

"Ma'am, did you see what exploded?"

"No . . . the stage area, I think. I don't know where my friends are. Please . . . hurry!"

"We've already dispatched the fire department and police, ma'am."

She heard sirens from a few blocks away and cut off the call. She raised up, looking over the dashboard for the flashing lights. She couldn't see any, but the sirens grew louder.

She knelt on the floorboard, her knees on her floormat and her elbows on her seat, and texted Desiree.

I'm at the car. Where are you?

No answer. She switched to a recent thread with Mara and texted again.

Got out. At car waiting. Where are you?

Nothing.

She dictated a group text to both of them.

Are you all right?

They were probably running or deaf, fighting their way out like she had. She tried calling them, but Mara's phone rang to voicemail. When Desiree's phone did the same, she yelled, "Call me! I'm waiting at the car and I'm scared. Where are you?" She was sobbing when she ended the call.

Hunkering on the floor was irrational. She knew that, but it didn't change her fear. Some enemy lurked just out of sight, an airplane dropping bombs, an army shooting missiles, anarchists just getting started. What if there was more?

She peeked over the dash again. A few more people ran past to their cars parked on the curb near her. She slid back up onto the seat, still slumped down so she wasn't visible, and started videotaping with her phone. She would want to process this later, document it, post it to social media, compare notes. She would want to have video of that moment when Mara and Desiree made it to the car.

But they didn't.

She stayed hunched in the car as two guys in Ed Loran T-shirts came up the block from behind her, got into the car in front of her, and pulled out. A car across the street pulled away from the curb and did a U-turn.

Maybe she should move her car, but what if her friends expected it to be at the landmark in front of that bank? She should wait.

As time passed without another incident, she sat up more fully, jittering as she waited for them to come. She called them a dozen times each, at least, sent multiple texts.

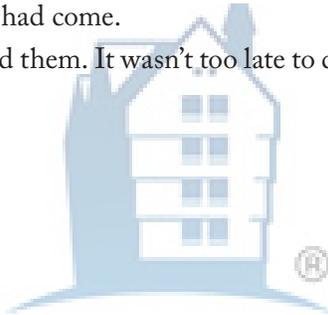
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Finally she stopped as certainty crushed her like a lead blanket. They were still in there. She hadn't seen them because they were probably on the floor. Why hadn't she looked for them? How could she have left them?

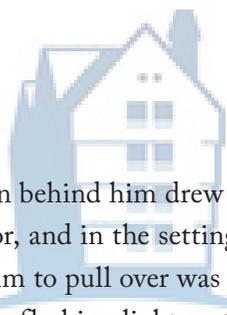
She had only thought of herself, only followed the instinct to survive. She hadn't given one thought to helping her friends.

Eventually her impatience gave way to boldness. She got out of the car, leaving it unlocked in case they came back, and on legs that felt too weak and tired to hold her up, she trod up the block the way she had come.

She had to find them. It wasn't too late to do the right thing.



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The wail of the siren behind him drew Dustin Webb's eyes to his rearview mirror, and in the setting sunlight he could see that the car urging him to pull over was not a squad car, but an unmarked Ford with a flashing light on the dash.

He was driving the speed limit on the interstate—why was he being pulled over? He moved to the right lane and negotiated an exit from I-20, onto an Atlanta street that was almost as busy. The car followed him, its siren still blaring.

"I wasn't speeding!" he yelled to his rearview mirror. He found a parking lot about a mile from the interstate and pulled off the road. The Ford followed him to a halt. Not disguising his irritation, Dustin opened his door to get out.

"Sir, stay in the car and put your hands on the wheel."

Dustin looked back. There were two of them in plain clothes, and both had weapons drawn. Was this a robbery?

"I need some identification," Dustin called through the door as they moved closer.

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“Hands on the steering wheel!” one of the men yelled again. In his rearview mirror, Dustin saw that a police cruiser had pulled in behind them. Two uniformed cops joined the other two men, their weapons drawn, too.

Four weapons pointed at his head? “What’s going on?” he yelled. “What did I do?”

Two more police cars approached, one pulling in front of him, another stopping next to him, blocking him in. The cops inside joined the others, all with guns drawn.

“This has got to be a mistake!” Dustin shouted.

“Slowly exit the car with your hands above your head!”

Dustin slid out, keeping his hands in the air.

“On the ground, facedown!”

He lowered to his knees, then to his hands and his stomach.

They descended on him, zip tying his hands behind him, frisking him and taking out his wallet and his phone. When they seemed satisfied that he wasn’t armed, they yanked him to his feet.

The one who’d pulled him over showed Dustin his badge. He was a special agent with Alcohol, Tobacco, and Firearms. “Mr. Webb, I’m Special Agent Halsey. We had an anonymous tip this morning about what’s in your trunk.”

“Anonymous tip?” Dustin repeated, incredulous. “Wait a minute.” He took a step backward as a familiar sense of injustice he hadn’t felt in years constricted his lungs, and he swallowed to combat the sudden dryness in his throat. “There’s nothing in my trunk. My gym bag, some tools . . .” They had the wrong guy. Any minute now they would realize it. Any second . . .

“We need to search your vehicle,” Halsey said.

“Do you have a warrant?” Dustin asked.

“We have one on the way.”

“On the way? What is this?” This would drag out longer if they waited for it, and Dustin didn’t want that. He had nothing to hide. “Just go ahead. Search it. There’s nothing.”

He stood near the rear of the car, watching as they took his key fob out of his pocket and unlocked his trunk.

The trunk came open, and there was his gym bag with his sweaty clothes from when he had worked out days ago.

But something wasn’t right. There were other things in the trunk, things he hadn’t put there. Boxes he’d never seen before. “What is that?” he asked.

“Back away, everybody,” Halsey yelled. “Get the render-safe team here.”

Dustin knew what that meant. In the army, he’d served in the Ordnance Corps and had been on a bomb diagnostic team himself, whenever there was a bomb or mine threat. Halsey grabbed him and walked him to the squad car in front of his car and opened the back door. Dustin knew better than to resist, so he bent and got in. They closed him in, and officers stood guard at his door. He turned around and strained to see through the rear window. What were those boxes?

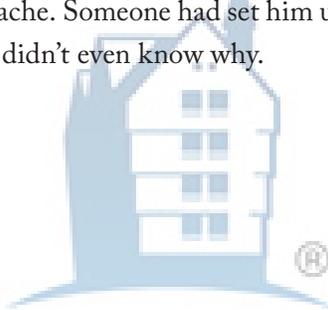
There were more cops showing up now. He looked at their T-shirts and the markings on their uniforms. This was a multi-agency effort. What was going on? They had closed off the road, with police cars blocking all lanes on both sides. A German shepherd on a leash barked and lunged at Dustin’s car as someone in an ATF shirt walked the dog closer.

This was the Twilight Zone. He couldn’t have been more confused if he’d been on a three-day bender, but he hadn’t had a drink since he got out of the army.

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He started to sweat, and his heartbeat sped up to a fight-or-flight tempo. He needed help. He laid his head back on the seat, closed his eyes, and prayed that whatever this was, they'd realize he wasn't to blame. The last time he'd looked in his trunk, he'd only had that gym bag, a set of jumper cables, maybe a flashlight. Someone had planted something in his trunk, something that required the ordnance people to identify or detonate, then they'd called and tipped off the police.

Reality hit him now with full force. His stomach roiled and his head began to ache. Someone had set him up. He was in a lot of trouble, and he didn't even know why.



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