

IF I LIVE

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IF I LIVE

TERRI BLACKSTOCK

New York Times Bestselling Author



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If I Live

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This book is lovingly dedicated to the Nazarene.



CASEY

Fried rice isn't worth dying for.

I never should have come inside. I should have stuck with fast food so I could use the drive-thru, order into the box, and get my food through a window. But I needed to use the restroom and wash my face after hours on the road, and I was sick to death of burgers, fries, and salads. I stopped at a Chinese restaurant nestled within this shopping center, figuring not many diners would be here this time of day. The lights are usually dim in Chinese places, so with my long brown wig and the glasses I'm wearing to hide my eyes, I thought I could

pull it off. But the media has shown multiple sketches of how I might be disguised.

The circular booth in the corner is full of college students. A girl looks at me, then whispers to her friend, and now everyone at the table is staring at me. One of them gets on the phone.

Trying to look calm, I amble toward the front door. The waitress runs after me. "Food almost ready!"

"I'll be right back," I say, though I have no intention of returning.

Outside, I hurry up the sidewalk. I reach for a door to the anchor store and glance back. Two of the girls have darted out of the restaurant and are talking animatedly on their phones. I glance toward my car. I can't get back to it now. If those girls see me get into it, the police will know what I'm driving, and I'll have to get a different one. I'm running too low on cash. I couldn't have gotten this one without Dylan's help.

I go into the department store and look around for somewhere to hide. In the back corner of the store, I see the sign for the fitting rooms. I slip through the door and find an empty dressing room with a door that locks. I lock myself in and sit on the bench to catch my breath for a minute, my mind racing through options.

The college girls saw me enter this store. Any minute now the police will be here and I'll be arrested. My heart pounds, and the sutures on my shoulder feel like they're ripping. I wonder if they're getting infected. I readjust my sling, but then I realize it's a dead giveaway. It may even be how the students spotted me. I take it off and stuff it into my bag.

I also pull off my wig and pull my dyed black hair up into a ponytail. Keeping my arm close to my ribs, I find my baseball cap in my bag and pull it on, ponytail through the back, and take off my glasses. I shrug off my outer blouse, leaving only a tank top beneath it. I shove my sunglasses on and consider myself in the mirror. I do look different than I did five minutes ago.

Fatigue weighs me down—probably from blood loss when I was shot a few days ago—but I have to keep moving. I hang my purse strap over my good shoulder, then pile the clothes hanging in the dressing room over my arm as a prop. Never mind that they don't fit me or look like anyone in my generation would wear them. I just need to look like a normal shopper until I can get out the back door.

I venture out of the dressing room, careful with my wounded arm. Feigning interest in a sale rack, I glance around for the girls. I don't see them, so I look out the front window. I see a blue light flashing. They're here.

I head toward the back, hoping I can find a door somewhere. There's a swinging door with a sign that says "Employees Only," and I drop the clothes hanging over my arm and push into the back room. I hurry past boxes and racks of clothing, a broom closet and a mop bucket, and an employee bathroom. I see a back door for deliveries.

I open it and look both ways up the alley. There's no police car here yet. No one is out here.

I cross the alley and walk, as weak and winded as a heart patient, through a patch of woods that takes me uphill until I

have a view of the parking lot. I sit on a stump behind a cluster of trees, watching the college kids talking to the cops and taking selfies with police cars in the background. This will be all over social media within twenty minutes. Cable news will pick it up, and maybe even network news. This town is ruined for me now. I have to leave.

I keep walking through the trees. On the other side of the woods, I come out in a bad area. There are men loitering on corners and lightly clad women approaching cars stalled in traffic.

I see a girl with a curly blonde wig on, wider than her small shoulders. I've had black hair, brunette, blonde . . . I've had a red wig, a blonde wig, a brown wig. None of them have had frizzy curls. No one would be looking for that.

I walk down the hill through the trees and wait for the girl to come back to the cracked sidewalk. "Excuse me," I say. "Can I talk to you?"

She looks like she's too busy for me, so I add, "There's money in it."

I have her attention now, so she turns to me. "What is it, honey?"

"I like your hair. Is it a wig?"

"Yeah," she says, touching it. "Thanks."

"I wondered if I could buy it off of you."

The woman laughs. "What? You want to buy my hair?"

"I'll give you two hundred cash."

She hesitates. "Four."

"Two fifty."

She huffs. “I paid a lot for it. I’m not just giving it away.”

“Okay,” I say, digging for my wallet. “Three hundred. Take it or leave it.”

She sees my other wig in my bag. “What, do you collect wigs or something?”

“Yeah, it’s kind of my thing. I’m an actress.”

She grins and takes her hair off, revealing short-cropped brown hair with blonde highlights. She could be a soccer mom with that look. She ruffles it so it doesn’t look so flattened and reaches for the cash. “I really liked this wig,” she mutters.

“Surely you can get another one for a lot less, right?”

“I wouldn’t sell it if I couldn’t.”

“Thanks,” I say. “I really appreciate it.”

I take the wig and stuff it into my purse, which is full to the brim, and when the girl turns away, I go back into the woods. I dust it off, inside and out, then put it on. It feels big and floppy. I look into my phone and see that it doesn’t really look that bad. I actually kind of like it. With my sunglasses on, I don’t think anyone would guess it was me.

I sit on the ground for a while, wishing I had gotten my food before I had to run. I’m starving, but it’ll be a while before I can eat.

After a couple of hours, I need to use the facilities again. I go back through the woods to where the wig lady worked the street and see a convenience store with barred windows. I go in and try the bathroom door, but it’s locked, so I have to ask for a key. They have a TV on behind the register, and I already see my face and the footage of me in the restaurant. They’re

warning people that I'm in the area, and that I may be armed and dangerous.

The cashier doesn't even look at me. She hands me the key and I hurry to the ladies' room. I take a mental inventory of what they'll know from security video in the restaurant. My purse, for sure. It's big and black and nondescript, but I unload everything into the sink, turn it inside out so that the plaid lining is on the outside, and put everything back. I look down at my shoes. They're gray sneakers. Surely those won't stand out any more than my jeans will.

I realize only then that the bandage on my shoulder is visible without the shirt I was wearing over my tank top. And I don't have a different shirt to put on.

Someone knocks on the door, and I yell out, "Almost finished!"

I look in the mirror again and sigh, then pull out the shirt I took off earlier and sling it over my wounded shoulder like a towel.

I hear more sirens, see blue lights flashing on the glass in the window above my head. Are they still looking for me?

I'm sweating as I open the door and step out. The woman waiting snatches the key out of my hand and shoots inside.

The cashiers are still distracted with the police cars driving by and the news of drama in the area. I see a rack of T-shirts, so I grab one and a pack of peanut-butter crackers, step up to the counter, and clear my throat. One of the cashiers glances at the stuff instead of at me. "This all?"

"Yes," I say.

She rings me up, gives me a receipt. I throw the T-shirt over my shoulder too and go outside. Around the corner of the building, I pull the T-shirt on over my tank and throw my blouse and the long brown wig into a trash can. I stuff a bag I find in there down on top of my things to cover them.

At least now if they search me, there won't be immediate evidence that I'm the one who was seen in the restaurant.

I go back through the woods, hoping I can get to my car. The police cars should be gone from the shopping center for now. Have they quit looking for me?

Spent, I walk down the hill and around the stores to the front parking lot and, without hesitating, head purposefully to my car. I get in and don't even look around before I pull out of my space.

I see one police car across the parking lot, but his lights are off. I don't see the driver anywhere outside. I pull out of the lot into traffic and drive away.

When I'm far enough away, I let myself breathe.

DYLAN

My car is still sitting in Dallas, right where Casey left it before she was shot by a child molester who dealt drugs. Dex drops me off at it and I glance around for some sign of Keegan and Rollins, the detectives determined to kill Casey before she exposes them, but I don't see them. The car is parked on the street behind the house where Casey got shot. From where we sit, I can see between two houses to the molester's yard and driveway. There are no police cars there. In fact, it looks as if no one is home. The truck in the backyard that would have proven some of his crimes has been moved. I hope the police towed it to their lab.

“You need to replace that phone, Pretty Boy,” Dex says just before he drives away. “You need to have the same number Keegan will use to reach you.”

“They’ll figure out it’s a different phone when they can’t track me anymore.”

“But they won’t know what you did with it. You can claim it got broken or lost.”

I appreciate that Dex is worried about it, since I duct taped the phone to the bottom of an eighteen-wheeler to throw Keegan and Rollins off my trail. If I hadn’t done that, both Casey and I would be dead by now.

“I guess I can replace it and use the same number.”

“Go to the cell phone store. They can transfer the number in minutes. If Keegan doesn’t have the serial number or whatever it is he needs to track the new phone, you’ll buy yourself some time.”

Dex leaves, and I head to the cell phone store and do what he suggests. Keegan is probably ballistic that I led him on a wild-goose chase. I would love to have seen the look on his face when he realized he’d been duped.

Once I have the phone, I fight the urge to call Casey on her burner phone or send her an e-mail on our secret account. I need to keep my contact with her as infrequent as possible to give her a chance to get farther away. I can’t give Keegan any opportunity to get close to Casey again.

Instead I do what Keegan might expect and give him a call. He picks up on the first ring. “Where are you, Dylan?” His voice is sharp, angry.

"I'm in Dallas," I say. "My phone broke, and I was so busy going after Casey that I didn't have a chance to replace it until now."

"I noticed that," he says. "You missed all the fun."

"I was there before you were," I say, because I know that he knows it already. "I showed up right after the gunshot and I took off after her. When I didn't find her, I went to the hospitals, checked every one, showing her picture around, seeing if she had checked in for that gunshot wound."

He hesitates a moment. "We know she went to a convenience store bathroom," he says. "She was gone before we got there, but the blood trail ended. She must have patched it up or had somebody come and pick her up."

"I don't know," I say. "She seems like a loner. I doubt she has friends who would break the law to rescue her."

"I wouldn't put anything past her," he says. "I wouldn't put anything past you. Maybe you're the one who helped her."

The muscles in my neck tense, and I feel a headache coming up the back of my head. "I didn't let her escape," I say. "I told you I was looking for her."

"So why did they think you were me? Those people that shot her."

"I didn't tell them I was you," I say. "I just showed up and they acted like they'd been expecting me. So what's the deal with those people?"

"They were arrested by Dallas police," Keegan says. "Can you believe that? Somebody finally helps us get close to her, and now Dallas is hampering our investigation by arresting them for some kind of child abuse."

“Some kind of child abuse?” I ask. “You mean the molestation of a seven-year-old girl? Trading her for drugs?”

“Okay, they had it coming. But it sure threw a wrench in our case. Automatically they’re sunk as witnesses. But I’ve got lots more. People she worked with, people who knew she was involved with that guy Cole Whittington who ran off a cliff, people who rented a room to her.”

I don’t bother telling him that Casey had nothing to do with Whittington’s death. Casey was trying to keep the man alive. “So the Trendalls are in jail? And their dealer? All of them?”

“That’s what I said.”

“Child’s in foster care?”

“My understanding. So are you heading back home?”

My acting skills aren’t what they should be if I’m going to keep lying to him, so I’d better get off the phone. I quickly tell him a few more things I plan to do to find Casey in Dallas, and he accepts that. He sounds eager to get off the phone too. He doesn’t really want or need my help. He wants to have no one else but Rollins there when he finds her, so they can do whatever they want to her. Then he can claim that she was armed and fired on them, and they had to shoot her.

When I get off the phone, I ask myself: What would I be doing if I were honestly chasing her? I would probably pay a visit to the Dallas police detective again, as though I don’t yet know about the Trendalls’ arrest, or where little Ava is. If nothing else, I can at least put Casey’s fears about the little girl to rest.