

PRAISE FOR TERRI BLACKSTOCK

“Justice may be blind but that doesn’t keep it from facing mortal danger. In *Aftermath*, expert storyteller Terri Blackstock ratchets up the suspense in a novel that delivers on every level. Conflicts rage and loyalties are tested to the ultimate limit. Set aside plenty of time when you pick up this book—you’ll not to want to take a break.”

—Robert Whitlow, bestselling author of *Trial and Error*

“In *Aftermath*, Terri Blackstock plumbs the depth of human emotion in the face of devastating tragedy, grief, and loss. Yet, she still manages to give readers her trademark suspenseful story, sweet romance, and hope for the future. From gut-wrenching scenes in a cancer patient’s hospital room to seeing the world through the eyes of a young woman with a debilitating mental health disorder, Blackstock pulls no punches about human frailties. Does the end justify the means? Romantic suspense lovers won’t want to miss *Aftermath*.”

—Kelly Irvin, bestselling author of *Closer Than She Knows*

“Plot twists and likable characters light up this latest romantic suspense from bestselling author Blackstock. Themes of redemption and grace mark this love story that will be a hit among fans of Christian fiction and clean romantic suspense.”

—*Library Journal* for *Smoke Screen*

“Blackstock’s intense and twisty story will please fans of her faith-grounded crime dramas.”

—*Publishers Weekly* for *Smoke Screen*

“Wow . . . just . . . wow. Terri Blackstock has been one of my favorite authors for a very long time. I just finished *Smoke Screen* in one sitting simply because I couldn’t put it down. Terri never fails to deliver a plot

that moves and well-developed characters who are real, flawed, and relatable. And, of course, it's always a joy to watch her bring down the villain. I can't say enough good things about this story. Just a word of warning: if you decide to pick up this book, don't plan to do anything else until you finish it."

—Lynette Eason, bestselling, award-winning
author of the Blue Justice series

"Terri Blackstock once again proves she's the queen of suspense with this masterfully penned novel. The story grips you on page one and doesn't let go until you've ripped through every page. Highly recommended!"

—Carrie Stuart Parks, author of *Relative Silence*, for *Smoke Screen*

"Full of secrets, lies, and with a visceral impact that grabs from the first sentence, *Smoke Screen* is Terri Blackstock at her finest. Well-drawn characters and a plot that unspools seamlessly make it unputdownable. Highly recommended!"

—Colleen Coble, *USA TODAY* bestselling
author of the Lavender Tides series

"Blackstock's charming romance is sure to put readers in the Christmas spirit. Recommended to fans of Karen Kingsbury and readers who DVR the entire holiday line-up on the Hallmark Channel."

—*Booklist* for *Catching Christmas*

"Blackstock delivers a tender and funny yuletide tale of faith, hope, and love. Quirky characters and a wholesome plot will please inspirational readers looking for a heartwarming Christmas story."

—*Publishers Weekly* for *Catching Christmas*

"The feel-good Christmas book of the year. Blackstock's tale of love and redemption wrapped in a holiday bow will leave you smiling. Don't miss *Catching Christmas*."

—Rachel Hauck, *New York Times* bestselling
author of *The Wedding Dress*

"If I Live is a grabber from page one, delivering an exhilarating mix of chase, mystery, and spiritual truth. Longtime Blackstock fans will be delighted, and new Blackstock fans will be made."

—James Scott Bell, bestselling author
of the Mike Romeo thrillers

"Emotions, tensions, and suspense all run high in this fast-paced, edge-of-your-seat thriller."

—RT Book Reviews, 4½ stars, TOP PICK! for *If I'm Found*

"Crisp dialogue and unexpected twists make this compulsive reading, and a final chapter cliffhanger leaves things poised for a sequel."

—Publishers Weekly for *If I Run*

"A fast-paced, thoroughly mesmerizing thriller . . . An enthralling read with an entirely unexpected conclusion makes the reader question if a sequel could be in the works."

—NY Journal of Books for *If I Run*

"Few writers do mystery/suspense better than Terri Blackstock, so I leaped at the opportunity to read her latest . . . Needless to say, when Book Two comes out, there will be no 'if' about it. I'll run to get in line."

—Love & Faith in Fiction for *If I Run*

"If I Run is a gripping suspense novel. Both of the central characters are very appealing, engaging the reader . . . The tension is palpable throughout and doesn't let up until the very end . . . Highly recommended."

—Mysterious Reviews

"A story rich with texture and suspense, this family murder mystery unfolds with fast pacing, a creepy clown murder suspect, and threatening blog visitor to boot."

—Publishers Weekly for *Truth Stained Lies*

AFTER MATH

Books by Terri Blackstock

If I Run Series

- 1 *If I Run*
- 2 *If I'm Found*
- 3 *If I Live*

The Moonlighters Series

- 1 *Truth Stained Lies*
- 2 *Distortion*
- 3 *Twisted Innocence*

The Restoration Series

- 1 *Last Light*
- 2 *Night Light*
- 3 *True Light*
- 4 *Dawn's Light*

The Intervention Series

- 1 *Intervention*
- 2 *Vicious Cycle*
- 3 *Downfall*

The Cape Refuge Series

- 1 *Cape Refuge*
- 2 *Southern Storm*
- 3 *River's Edge*
- 4 *Breaker's Reef*

Newpointe 911

- 1 *Private Justice*
- 2 *Shadow of Doubt*
- 3 *Word of Honor*
- 4 *Trial by Fire*
- 5 *Line of Duty*

The Sun Coast Chronicles

- 1 *Evidence of Mercy*
- 2 *Justifiable Means*
- 3 *Ulterior Motives*
- 4 *Presumption of Guilt*

Second Chances

- 1 *Never Again Good-bye*
- 2 *When Dreams Cross*
- 3 *Blind Trust*
- 4 *Broken Wings*

With Beverly LaHaye

- 1 *Seasons Under Heaven*
- 2 *Showers in Season*
- 3 *Times and Seasons*
- 4 *Season of Blessing*

Novellas

- Seaside*
- The Listener* (formerly
The Heart Reader)
- The Heart Reader of Franklin High*
- The Gifted*
- The Gifted Sophomores*

Stand-alone Novels

- Smoke Screen*
- Catching Christmas*
- Shadow in Serenity*
- Predator*
- Double Minds*
- Soul Restoration: Hope
for the Weary*
- Emerald Windows*
- Miracles (The Listener
/ The Gifted)*
- Covenant Child*
- Sweet Delights*
- Chance of Loving You*

AFTER MATH

TERRI
BLACKSTOCK



THOMAS NELSON
Since 1798

Aftermath

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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

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?

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.

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.

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.

“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.

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.

Jamie Powell stepped up to the microphones attached to the makeshift dais on the courthouse steps. Wind whipped her hair, blonde strands slashing across her face, making her wish she had worn it up today. She tried not to touch it during her statement, but now she swept it back so it at least wouldn't stick to her lips.

Her client, Martin Ash—clad in a pinstriped suit that made him look like a caricature of himself—stood behind her, beaming like a lottery winner. His charges would have given him a maximum of twenty-five years in prison, but the acquittal just announced would allow him to walk free.

“Ms. Powell, did you expect the acquittal from the jury?” a reporter from the *Atlanta Journal Constitution* yelled.

Jamie leaned toward the microphones. “Whenever a jury is out for three days, you don't know exactly what they're going to bring back, but we did have some early indications based on the questions they sent to the judge.”

“What was your strategy going into this trial?” a CBS network correspondent asked.

Jamie looked back over her shoulder to John Brackton, the partner in her firm who was spearheading this case. He hadn’t had much to do with it day to day—it had been Jamie’s show. But she still had to defer to him since he was the lead attorney. He was already stepping forward.

Just as he began to speak about the strategy that she had implemented in the courtroom, Jamie felt her phone vibrating in her pocket. She ignored it and kept her eyes on her boss, tracking everything he said, in case she needed to clarify anything.

All at once, phones chimed, buzzed, and chirped. One by one, the reporters turned their attention from John to their phones. One reporter turned and whispered to his cameraman, then pushed back through the crowd to leave. The cameraman lowered his camera, shoved his way up front, unclasped his microphone from the cluster on the dais while John was still talking, and ran down the steps. Briefly distracted, John stumbled on his words but tried to go on. “So we were able to show the jury exactly what the truth was . . .”

Other members of the media pushed forward and unclipped their mikes as John droned on. “The plaintiff complained of irregularities, but . . .”

A siren blared as a police car sped by on the road in front of them, followed by fire trucks. It was as if there was a conspiracy to keep this press conference from happening.

Jamie watched one cameraman run to the curb. His network van pulled up, and he jumped in. It screeched off.

John paused in his bluster as the rest of the media began to abandon them. He looked at her. “What’s happening?”

“No idea.” She grabbed the last person removing his mike. “Tell me what happened. What text did you all get?”

“An explosion or something over at Trudeau Hall.”

Only then did it register—the smell of smoke wafting on the air. The sirens got louder again as ambulances tore past.

Trudeau Hall was downtown, just a few blocks north of here. She looked in that direction and saw a foggy drift of smoke hovering in the air.

“I thought I was going to get to speak,” her client whined.

“I thought you were, too,” she said, “but the press was already breaking up. A bigger story to cover.”

“I want my name cleared,” he said. “I need to get on TV to prove my innocence.”

“We’ll see if we can get you an interview tonight,” she said. “It’ll be even better than an impromptu press conference. For now, just go home and enjoy your freedom. It’s all over.”

Martin reluctantly went back to where his wife was waiting with his family. Jamie swiped through her phone, looking for more news about what was happening less than a mile away.

“Let’s get to the office before they start blockading the streets,” John said, and she followed him down the steps and out to the parking lot.

From here, they could see more smoke up the street and people running from the direction of the concert hall.

“I’ll see if I can find out more about what happened,” John said as he got into her passenger seat.

She put her briefcase in the back seat of her Lexus and slid in behind the wheel. “Couldn’t have been too long ago, but I didn’t hear anything, did you?”

He didn't look up from his phone. "No, nothing. Maybe it was while we were still inside."

She turned on the radio and switched it to a local FM station. An announcer was talking rapid-fire.

". . . Trudeau Hall, where Ed Loran was holding a political rally. The place was full, and people have been calling in and telling us that they heard an explosion from the front of the room. We're told there were many fatalities. First responders are on the scene. We're trying to get information right now about where family members can get word about their loved ones. Stay tuned, and we'll keep you updated as we learn more."

Her stomach sank as she thought about the mayhem that must be happening in that building right now. *Please, God, take care of those who are still alive . . .*

John cursed. "You can't go that way. Turn right here."

She whipped into the right lane and barely made the turn that took them farther from the concert hall. But traffic was nearly at a standstill there, too, as more ambulances sired through.

John's phone rang, and he put it to his ear. "John Brackton."

As he talked, Jamie's mind raced. An explosion in a crowded concert hall? Loran was popular, but the band who played at his rally today was even more popular. The crowd was probably young. How many of them had died? What must their families be going through? Were there people still trapped, in need of rescue?

Suddenly she wanted to get to her mother's house, pick up Avery, and hold the seven-year-old tight until she complained. She wanted to smell her daughter's hair and savor her safety.

It took twenty minutes to get five miles back to her office. They were almost to the firm's parking garage when Jamie's phone rang. She checked it. It was a line at the city jail.

“I have to take this,” she told John, who was still on the phone. “I can let you out here if you want.”

He nodded and got out, still talking on the phone, and disappeared through the front door.

Jamie swiped the phone on as she pulled into the parking garage. “Jamie Powell.”

“Hey, kiddo.”

She couldn’t quite place the voice, but it had the warm, nostalgic sound of familiarity. “Who’s this?”

“Dustin Webb.”

She caught her breath. Of course. That deep, raspy voice, and he was the only one who’d consistently called her kiddo. “Dustin? Why are you calling from the jail?”

“I’m in trouble. I need a lawyer.”

She shook her head, as if trying to adjust her brain. “What happened?”

“I was pulled over, and I let them search my car. I had nothing to hide . . . that I knew of.”

Her heart jolted. “That you knew of? What did they find?”

“Explosives, apparently.”

She drew in a breath and tried to think. Explosives? After a local bombing? This wasn’t good. “Dustin, listen to me very carefully. Do not talk to them. Don’t say a single word until I get there.”

“When can you come?”

“I’m in my car now. I’ll be there in a few minutes. But I’m serious, Dustin. No sarcasm, no smart-aleck comebacks, no jokes. Nothing. Tell them you’re waiting for your attorney, then don’t say another word.”

“Got it.”

Still holding her phone, she almost ran into a post as she

pulled into a wheelchair space, then backed out of it and turned around. She headed for the exit signs. “Why did they pull you over in the first place?”

“They said they’d gotten a tip. They had a search warrant on the way. I didn’t put those boxes in my car. I didn’t even know they were there, so I told them to go ahead and search.”

She frowned, her mind racing. “Do you know who could have put them there?”

“No idea. I don’t know what’s going on.”

“Okay, not a word, Dustin. I’m on my way.”

She navigated her way down the twisting ramp of the parking garage and pulled into traffic, heading toward downtown. This morning when she’d gotten out of bed, she had believed anything could happen today. Martin Ash could be found guilty and be dragged out of the courtroom, providing all the drama that the media had come for. Or he could be found not guilty and set free. But she had never once thought that Dustin Webb might come back into her life.

They hadn’t been in touch in the past fifteen years, through no fault of her own. He had ignored all of her letters, her phone calls, and her texts in those first couple of years after he left for boot camp. She had tried to find him on social media, but he wasn’t the type to put himself out there like that. Even when her husband died of a drug overdose, he hadn’t come to the funeral. He had sent flowers and a card that said he was praying for her. She hadn’t even known he prayed. That was the last she had heard from him.

But the end of their relationship didn’t negate the beginning, no matter how improbable their friendship had been when it began, when she was nine.

She would never forget the thirteen-year-old boy who’d

moved in with the family next door to her and sat on the porch or bounced a basketball in the driveway for hours a day. She'd heard neighbors talking to her mom about his four foster homes and the fact that his aunt and uncle had finally moved him in with them. She didn't know what a foster home was, or why he wasn't with his parents, but she knew he was lonely. She left him alone since he never looked up at her when she was out playing.

But one day her black Lab puppy dug under the fence and got into his aunt's yard. Dustin captured him and brought the squirming dog back. He found her sitting in the tree in her front yard. "Hey, kiddo, you missing someone?"

"Coco, what are you doing out?" she asked, climbing down. "Thanks for catching him."

"It wasn't easy. He's fast. You know he dug a hole under the fence?"

She dropped to the ground and reached for the dog. He licked Dustin's face. "He likes you. Do you have a dog?"

"Nope. Never have. Aunt Pat is allergic."

"She had one before her son went to college. He took him with him."

"Figures." His face changed. "Anyway, if he comes over again, I'll bring him back."

As he started to walk away, she called out, "Is your name Dustin?"

"Yeah," he said, turning around.

"Mine's Jamie."

"Good to know."

"Do you like it here?"

He gave her a half-amused smile, then said, "It's okay."

"What's a foster home?" she asked.

He looked around, as if to see if anyone could hear, then came back closer to her. “How did you know that?”

“I don’t know. I guess I heard somebody say it.”

“Look it up.”

“I did. Is it like when you live with strangers?”

He grinned again. “Something like that.”

“How come you lived with them?”

“Because my parents died.”

“I’m sorry,” she said. “I didn’t know that. I didn’t mean to—”

“It’s okay,” he cut in. “Car wreck, a long time ago.”

“Do you like living with your aunt?”

“She doesn’t like living with me.”

“How do you know?”

“You ask a lot of questions, you know that?”

“Yeah, I’ve been told.”

“So how do you get on her good side?”

“Whose?”

“My aunt Pat. If you saw her with her kids, maybe you know better than I do.”

“She was nice to them,” Jamie said. “She probably just needs some time to get used to you.”

“Nobody ever gets used to me,” he said.

“I’m going to, now that we’re friends.”

He smiled fully now, but she knew he was just amused. “Keep thinking that, kiddo. We’ll see how you feel in a few months.”

She watched him go back to his yard and wondered if he’d ever talk to her again.

But the next day, when he was in the backyard, she yelled at him over the fence. “Hey, Dustin!”

“Hey, kiddo,” he said.

She climbed up on a bench beside the fence and looked down at him. “Do you feel better today?”

“I didn’t feel bad yesterday.”

“You weren’t too happy. Did I hurt your feelings?”

“No. I don’t get hurt feelings that easy.”

“My questions didn’t make you mad?”

“Of course not.”

“Then can I ask some more?”

He sighed and sat down on a chair at a patio table. “Go for it.”

“Do you have a grandma?”

“Both of them died.”

She got that feeling again that she was making him mad.

“Do you like art?”

He laughed. “Do I like what?”

“Art. Or music? You look like a musician.”

“What does a musician look like?”

“I don’t know. Kind of cool.”

“I look cool.”

“I didn’t say you did. Just . . . musicians.”

“It’s okay. I like art and music, I guess.”

“Do you play checkers?”

“I have.”

“Want to play?”

“Not right now,” he said.

“Tomorrow?”

“You’re pushy, aren’t you?”

“It’s not like you have anything to do. It’s summer and you just got here, and you don’t know anybody.”

“Maybe tomorrow,” he said.

The memory made her smile now, because they had played

checkers often after that, even though he preferred video games. But her mom wouldn't let her go in his aunt Pat's house, because she liked to keep it just so, and besides, her mother thought he was too old for them to hang out inside each other's houses. So they wound up sitting in the driveway and playing.

Their friendship started out grudgingly on his part, but over the months, he stopped acting like he was just walking by when he happened on her, and he seemed to grow less embarrassed to be caught playing with someone so much younger. He tolerated her questions more and more, and even started questioning her.

They'd remained friends into her teen years and through his college era, through all their dating experiences and relationships. She had relied on him as more than a friend, and he seemed to rely on her as a trusted confidante. That was why his cool departure had been so disruptive, and why his silence since had been so painful.

She hadn't even been aware that he had moved back to Atlanta. Her mother still lived next door to his aunt Pat, and she had never mentioned it.

None of that mattered now, she thought as she zigzagged her way up the outermost streets of downtown Atlanta, trying to avoid the emergency traffic and roadblocks. He needed her now, and she wasn't going to hold those years against him. She had to put all that aside and lean on the professionalism she had fostered over the last years. None of her history with Dustin—finished or unfinished—should affect what she did now.