

Linda Naughton

BLACKOUT TRAIL

LINDA NAUGHTON

REVIEW
COPY

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THE WORLD AS I KNEW it ended just after 9:42am Eastern Standard Time, though I didn't realize it at the time. My phone had just buzzed with a call from my sister.

"Hey Jess," I said, brushing back some errant hair as I brought the phone up to my ear. I cupped my hand over the other ear as one of those golf-cart style vehicles pattered by, carrying someone to the opposite end of the cavernous airport terminal.

"Anna. You said you'd call when you got in. The website says your plane landed thirty minutes ago." The chiding words had an edge of mirth to them, ribbing me like always.

"I haven't even been gone twelve hours and you're already stalking me online?" I chuckled. "I was going to call as soon as I got my bag. What is it—like, before seven there? Go back to bed."

"The girls got me up early," Jess explained. I could hear the smile in her voice. "They miss you already. I wish you'd change your mind and look for a job out here."

I smiled through my impatience. "Jess, we've been over this. You know there's only so long I can pretend to be civil to Dad and that woman. It's better if we have a few zip codes between us." After a beat, I added, "I miss you guys too."

"Okay, okay," she said, dropping it until the next time we talked. "Anyway, how was your fli—"

There was a click and then silence. "Jess? Hello?" I lowered the phone and narrowed my eyes at the blank display. No indicators, no clock—nothing. How could it be dead already? I'd charged it before I left Jess' house last night, and the damn thing was barely a month old. I scowled. "Oh, come on."

The nearby baggage carousel ground to a shuddering halt. A collective groan from the other passengers drew my attention away from the useless brick in my hand. Snatches of disjointed conversation reached my ears.

"Can you hear me? I think we got cut off. Frank?"

"The hell? I had plenty of charge left."

"Mooooommy! My movie stopped!"

A growing sense of dread pooled in my stomach. It wasn't just our baggage carousel that had stopped; they all had. Both the overhead lights and the computer screens showing the baggage carousel assignments had gone dark too. The only light streamed in from the floor-to-ceiling windows lining the

perimeter of the baggage claim area. Why hadn't the emergency lights kicked on?

The automatic sliding doors had also stopped, confounding a gaggle of college kids trying to leave. Beyond the doors, an ominous stillness had replaced the constant bustle of parking shuttles, cars, and taxis creeping along the pickup lane. There should've been engine sounds. Horns. Something. Now there were just a bunch of confused and pissed-off people getting out of their vehicles.

Grumbling from the other passengers gave way to a stunned hush. Panic bubbled just beneath the surface. You couldn't set foot in an American airport these days without being bombarded with reminders of terrorism. Everyone looked at each other, the same question written on our faces: Was this some kind of attack? What should we do? I expected some sort of alert or explanation over the loudspeaker, telling everyone to remain calm, but none came.

A thunderous crash from the opposite end of the terminal had me ducking and covering my head. Metal screeched on metal, accompanied by the tinkle of shattered glass and an ear-splitting grinding sound. A chorus of terrified cries erupted around me. I'll admit it—I screamed too. I caught a glimpse of a plane fuselage crashing through the airport ceiling before plowing into the ground.

The plane flattened the south end of the building as casually as a child knocking over a stack of blocks, and the resulting fireball sent flaming debris flying in all directions. At the opposite end, the shock wave knocked me off my feet. A rush of hot air stung my face and hands.

People started picking themselves up off the ground. Dozens of survivors made a mad dash for the exits. Their screams

sounded distant to my ringing ears. Non-functioning doors proved to be a mild hiccup for the exodus. The lucky ones smashed through or pried the doors open before they got smashed against the glass.

Catching my breath, I rose to a crouch. The putrid smell of aviation fuel mixed with acrid smoke tickled my throat and made my eyes water. Heart hammering, I surveyed the destruction in slack-jawed horror. The rectangular terminal stretched for the length of a football field, and nothing remained of the south half but fiery rubble. Between here and there was a wide stretch where it looked like a bomb had gone off.

A man shambled along, his clothes engulfed in flames. He made it a few steps before someone knocked him down and started beating out the flames with a jacket. Other lumps of former passengers smoldered on the ground. A woman staggered in a daze, her shirt a bloody mess.

"My God," I breathed, pushing the ghastly images to some back corner of my mind, where I could process them later.

A hefty chunk of ceiling crashed down in front of me just as I made it to my feet. I jumped backward with a startled cry. This end of the building was comparatively intact, but everyone knew what happened to buildings after planes crashed into them. My gut screamed at me to make a run for it, but there were still injured people on the ground.

An older man crouched on hands and knees in the blast zone, his tailored suit now singed and tattered in places. I hurried over to him and bent to touch his elbow. "Can you walk?"

He stared at me like I was from Mars before his brain seemed to catch up.

"Yes," he replied, sucking in big gulps of air. "Yes, I think I..." His eyes went wide as saucers when he registered the

surrounding carnage, and he got so pale I worried he might faint.

I stepped in front of him to cut off his view. "Hey! Look at me." Tugging on his arms, I pulled him to his feet and pointed to the nearest exit. "Go outside. You'll be safe there. Go!" I gave him a nudge in the right direction and he started moving.

Someone grabbed my arm. It was a little girl, about seven or eight.

"My daddy needs help. Please help him!" Her eyes were wide and pleading, tears tracing lines through the soot on her face.

"Where? Show me." I offered my hand and let her lead the way. My stomach clenched as she took us closer to the wrecked half of the building. Survival instincts screamed at me to head away from the blaze. We were still some distance from the fire, but the heat pounded my face like a blast of hot air from an oven. The automatic sprinkler system soon drenched us both, but didn't make a dent in the inferno at the far end. Thick smoke blanketed the area, and I had the sudden impulse to scoop the kid up and carry her out of the building.

"There! Daddy!" The girl's urgent cry staved off any thoughts of flight. She pulled free of my hand, dashing over to a pile of rubble. It looked like the ceiling had come down. A man lay face-down, half-buried beneath the debris. Across his lower chest was a large, twisted metal frame that might once have been part of the baggage conveyor system. The girl fell to her knees beside him, and I followed suit.

"Sir, can you hear me? Sir?" The smoke made my voice hoarse. I coughed and shook his shoulder. Groaning, the man stirred.

"Daddy, wake up!" The girl tugged on his hand.

He turned his head and opened his eyes, squinting against the sprinkler mist. An instant later, alarm flooded his face.

"Lily!" He tried to push himself up, but the metal stopped him. He grimaced and then looked at the girl. "Lil, are you okay?"

Lily didn't answer, but just burst out crying, sprawling across her father's shoulder in an awkward hug. Only then did he seem to notice me, brow creasing in confusion.

"She's okay," I assured him, not wasting time on introductions. "Let's get you out."

I worked to get him free. The loose rubble came away easily—most of it was light ceiling tiles, insulation and chunks of mortar. The metal frame, slippery from the sprinklers, was a bigger problem. Even when I squatted down and used the full strength of my legs to lift it, the frame didn't budge an inch. The father tried to help, straining to push up from below, but we got nowhere. I fell back, breathless and frustrated, and the exertion brought on another coughing fit.

"You need to get her out of here." Agonized eyes pleaded with me.

Lily blubbered something unintelligible into his shoulder.

"No." I recoiled, horrified by the suggestion. I didn't want to admit I'd been thinking the same thing just before we found him. It was different now that I knew he was alive. "We'll figure something out. Can you breathe okay?" I worried he was being crushed by that giant thing on his chest.

"Yeah, most of the weight isn't on me. But my arm's pinned."

"Okay, hang in there." The terminal had mostly emptied, but I spotted a few people helping the wounded out at the other end. "Hey! We need some help over here! Hey!"

One man looked our way, but his wide eyes drifted past us to the fire. He ran off in the opposite direction. Everyone else either didn't hear, or was already busy dragging other people out. As I let out a frustrated curse, my eyes lit on an abandoned luggage cart. I ran over and grabbed the cart, unclipping the bungee cords and leaving suitcases in my wake.

"What are you doing?" The father squinted at me.

"I'm going to lever this off of you." I slid the cart under the edge of the metal frame, as if it were a suitcase to be lifted. Lily watched me with wide, tearful eyes. "OK, try to slide out on three. One... two... three." On 'three', I pushed down on the handle with all my might. It held there for a second and then the joint at the base of the cart snapped clean off, making me fall in an inelegant sprawl on the ground. "Shit!"

The father grimaced. "We need something stronger. There—what about those poles?" He pointed to the belted queue in front of a rental car desk. The explosion and panicked flight of the patrons had knocked most of them over, making a disorganized jumble.

"Let's try it." I hurried to grab a post, hunching over to stay out of the smoke. The crash had shattered many of the windows and sliding glass doors, providing some ventilation, but I shuddered to think what noxious crap we were all breathing in. And it was getting worse.

Lily yelled, "The fire's getting closer!" The concrete ceiling and walls might not burn, but the aviation gas, carpet and furnishings all fed the blaze.

I pushed the ruined suitcase cart aside and put the post in its place. "OK, here we go. Again on three..." This time when I pushed down on the makeshift lever, it just jammed there, stuck.

“Damn it, what is this thing made of?” It was heavier than it looked.

“It’s not going to work,” the father muttered, grim desperation in his voice. “Go. Please. Get her out of here.”

“NO!” Lily’s shriek was heartrending. She clung to her father, babbling. He mumbled something I couldn’t hear, nuzzling the top of her head.

“It’ll work,” I insisted, adding a silent prayer. The idea of carrying away a screaming Lily and leaving her dad to burn to death was almost as terrifying as the approaching flames. “Come on, please.” This time, it moved. Just for a second—just a bit—but it moved. I coughed and tried again, grunting and straining with the effort, and finally the frame lifted a few inches. It wasn’t much, but it was enough. “That’s it! Go!” Lily’s father started scooting out from under the frame. “Hurry!” I urged through gritted teeth. “I can’t hold it.”

“I’m out!” he gave a triumphant shout. Lily flung herself against him. He grimaced at the force of her hug. “It’s okay,” he reassured her, pulling her up with his good arm. He cradled the other against his chest.

“Come on, hurry!” I ushered them toward the nearest exit, just as another part of the ceiling came crashing down in a shower of sparks behind us.

Don't Let the Story End There

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