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Last Light

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DENI BRANNING STEPPED DOWN ONTO THE TARMAC, PULLED out the handle of her carry-on, and glanced back up at her dad. He was just exiting the commuter plane as he chatted over his shoulder with the man who'd sat next to him on the flight. Doug Branning had never met a stranger, which accounted for his success as a stockbroker. He'd snagged some of his best clients on flights like this.

The oppressive Birmingham humidity settled over Deni like a heavy coat. *It's temporary*, she told herself. She wouldn't have to spend the summer here. Just this last week of May, and then it was back to D.C., her new job, and the fiancé she'd dreamed of for all of her twenty-two years. Yes, it was hot in the nation's capital, too, and probably just as humid. But its fast-paced importance made it easier to bear.

As her father reached the bottom step, his small bag clutched in his hand, the loud hum of the plane's engine went silent. A sudden, eerie quiet settled over the place, as if someone had muted all the machinery around them. The conveyor belt purging the cargo bin of its luggage stopped. The carts dragging the luggage carriers stalled.

She smelled something burning.

Her father seemed oblivious to the sudden change, so she fell into step beside him, rolling her bag behind her.

"Look out! It's coming in too fast!"

She turned back to see the airline employees gaping at the sky. An airliner was descending too steeply from the sky, silently torpedoing toward the runway. “Dad—!”

She screamed as the plane shattered into the runway, the impact vibrating through her bones. Time seemed to stop in a nightmarish freeze-frame, then roll into slow-motion horror as the plane tumbled wildly across the pavement and spun into a building.

Her dad tried to pull away. “In the building, Deni! Now! Let’s go!”

Before she could get her feet to move, the plane exploded, flames bustling around it like a parachute that had finally caught wind. The blast of rippling heat knocked her off her feet, and before she could scramble up, her dad was over her, sheltering her with his body.

“Stay down, honey!”

She struggled to see through the shield of his arms. The fire conquered the broken fuselage, swallowing it whole. She imagined the people inside that plane, crawling over each other in a desperate effort to escape, slowly perishing in the murderous heat. Panic shot through her.

Her father got up and pulled her to her feet. “Come on, we’re going inside!”

“But the people! Dad, the people—” She looked back, feeling the heat on her face.

“*Now*, Deni!”

“They’re burning,” she screamed. “Somebody has to get them out!”

“They’re trying.” His voice broke as he got back to his feet and grabbed up her suitcase. “There’s nothing we can do.”

She got up, staring toward the wreckage. The crowd of employees who ran to give aid stood helpless, unable to get close. Her father put his arm around her and moved her toward the building. They ran up the steps to their arrival gate.

They were greeted by darkness.

They hurried through the terminal to a window that provided some light. A crowd of people clustered around it, watching the plane burn.

Doug headed for two Delta clerks who stood talking urgently. "Where are the fire trucks? Has anybody called them?"

A distracted employee shook his head. "The phones aren't working. Everything's out."

He grabbed his cell phone out of his pocket, and Deni watched him try to dial 911. But the readout was blank. He shook his head. "It's dead. My battery must have lost its charge. Try yours, Deni."

She dug her phone out of her purse and hit the *on* button. Hers was dead, too. Had both their batteries died on the plane?

She looked back out the window. The plane continued to burn ... engulfed in a conflagration that wouldn't be quenched. Helpless airport employees stood back, looking around for help. Someone had pulled out a fire extinguisher and was shooting white foam, but it was like squirting a water pistol at a towering inferno.

Deni thought of herself and her dad sitting on the plane just moments ago. It could have been *them* out there, trapped in a burning metal coffin.

Gritting her teeth, she pounded her fists on the window. "Where are the stupid fire trucks?"

"I don't know." Doug's whisper was helpless, horrified.

She watched the chaos on the tarmac as employees ran in different directions, looking confused and defeated, shouting and gesturing wildly for help. Some started pointing up to the sky ...

"Another plane!" someone next to her shouted.

She followed the man's gaze to another airliner coming in. The others started to scream as that plane dropped too fast, too steep.

She couldn't watch as it hit the ground, but she heard the deafening sound of another crash, felt the impact shake the building. Screams crescendoed.

Shivering, Deni looked up. The plane was spinning and tumbling across the grass separating the runways.

“Daddy!” She glanced at him, saw the horror in his eyes. She followed his gaze to the sky. Was something shooting the planes down? Were there more to come? Deni slipped her hand into his and felt his trembling. For the first time in her life, she was aware of her father’s fear. And though his strong, protective grip held her tight, she knew everything had changed.