

The End

It was Jim Masterson's last flight, but, of course, he did not know it. Not yet, anyway. He finished his drink, and stuffed the napkin into his now-empty cup. The powerfully-built man peered out through his window, watching the lights of small communities far below slowly scroll by. His black hair was peppered with streaks of grey and receding at the temples. He was clothed in comfortable khaki pants, a blue button-down shirt, and loafers. In short, he looked much like the other weary travelers, trying to get home on a late-night flight. Sleepy fellow passengers napped as the old commuter jet streaked through the sky.

Suddenly there was a white flash and for a brief instant the landscape below was illuminated with a dazzling brilliance. Startled, the nuclear physicist involuntarily drew back from the window, then put his face to it, watching the world below fade as it returned to normal night-time blackness.

“What the . . . ?” he exclaimed.

In that moment he became aware of several things: first, that the cabin had become pitch black, and second, that the whine of the jet engines had somehow changed. No, not changed; ceased. The third thing was that the lights of the towns below had flickered and then gone black.

All these events registered in his now wide-awake brain in rapid succession. Through the locked cockpit door, he could hear the pilot and copilot utter a string of muffled expletives. The flight's lone attendant gasped before she could catch herself, and the sleepy passengers began to wake up. Soon the aircraft was filled with the rising babble of frightened voices. Panic had not yet broken out, but Masterson realized it was only seconds away. He checked his watch; the digital face was blank.

“A total electrical failure,” he murmured, considering the puzzle. *The only thing that could produce that, he reasoned, would be an electromagnetic pulse of a very large amplitude. And the only thing that could produce that sort of EMP burst is an explosively pumped flux compression generator, or . . . a nuclear blast.*

“Ah! The flash! That explains it!” he spoke into the unlistening chaos around him. The flight attendant was calling for everyone to buckle their seatbelts. *Lot of good that will do, Jim thought, we're toast.*

The jet banked hard to the left, and then back to the right. *Well, at least that's a good sign. This old bucket is not a fly-by-wire marvel of electronics, but still has control cables.* Jim sensed the jet beginning to assume a nose-up attitude, as the pilots traded airspeed for altitude.

He sat back and looked at the dim outline of the seatback in front of him, illuminated only by the moonlight filtering in the windows. In that instant he knew he was going to die. His first thought was to call his wife and say goodbye while there was time. He pulled out his cell phone, only to stare stupidly at its darkened screen. *Duh! All the electronics are dead, genius.* The thought distracted him for a moment, but inexorably Jim was drawn back into a contemplation of his inevitable fate. *So this is it? And what have you made of your life, Jimbo, your one single life? Your one chance to make a difference? And what happens next?*

The disappointed moans from the cockpit told him that whatever gamble the pilots had made on a landing strip did not pan out. *I wonder what it will feel like to-*