

CHAPTER SAMPLER

WHEN THE WORLD
TURNS TO CHAOS, HOME IS
ALL THAT'S LEFT.

FLIGHT PLAN

ERIC WALTERS

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Summary: In this YA thriller, thirteen-year-old Jamie's flight is just taking off when all technology fails, plunging the world into chaos. After the pilot manages to land the plane safely, Jamie sets out on the perilous 1,200-mile journey home with the flight crew and a small group of determined passengers.

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For those readers who asked
so passionately for me to
continue writing this world.



CHAPTER
ONE

“I WISH I COULD PUT you right on the plane, Jamie,” my grandmother said as we shuffled through the security check-in.

“I think I can make it from here, and it’s not like I’m alone.”

My escort, Trina, gave a little smile. Her job was to walk me—an “unaccompanied minor”—through security and then be with me until she turned me over to a flight attendant on the plane.

“He’ll be supervised the entire way,” Trina said.

“I’m thirteen years old, and I don’t need to be supervised at all,” I huffed.

“Better safe than sorry,” my grandmother said. “I want to make sure you get back with your parents safe and sound.”

Trina smiled. “He’ll get special treatment because he’s a very special little member of our family.”

“Little?” I protested.

“Not little, but certainly a VIP.” Trina didn’t find my joke funny.

“This looks like the end of the line.” She handed my boarding pass to the TSA agent.

“I’m going to miss you so much!” my grandmother said as she threw her arms around me.

“I’ll miss you too.” I hugged her back.

“Now, promise me you’ll fly safely.”

“I don’t think they’re actually going to let me fly the plane. How about if you *drive* safely?”

“I’m a *very* safe driver,” she replied.

“It is a long trip,” I said. “Just think—you’ll be in your car almost as long as I’ll be in the air.”

She squeezed my shoulder. “Call me as soon as you land.”

The TSA agent handed my pass back to Trina. My granny gave me one more quick hug and released me as I was brought to the security check.

I put down my bag on the conveyor belt and took out my iPad. I put it in a white basket and then added my phone, wallet and shoes. I walked through the metal detector, and my bag reappeared. I shoved my wallet and phone back into my pockets and put my shoes back on.

“Slip this on,” Trina said. She handed me a lanyard with a big ID tag that included my information and a picture of me.

Great. “Thanks.” This was embarrassing.

I slipped it over my head and then turned the ID backward so nobody could see what it was.

“It’s pretty busy in here today,” she said as we walked.

“Well, O’Hare is the third-busiest airport in North America.”

“Have you flown through here before?”

I shrugged. “Twenty or thirty times. Chicago is a hub.”

“You’re obviously quite the flier!”

I was going to tell her that both of my parents were Delta pilots, but it always sounded like bragging. In a way it was. Being a pilot

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was a pretty impressive job. Not that I was planning on being one. I loved animals and was going to be a veterinarian.

“Why don’t you take a seat and I’ll check you in with the gate agent,” she said.

The waiting area was empty because it was still over ninety minutes before departure. My escort and the gate agent talked and laughed and then she came back and took a seat beside me.

“You’re all checked in.” She paused. “I *can* sit with you until you get on the plane.”

Obviously, she didn’t want to wait around. “I’ll be all right.”

“Are you sure?”

“I think I can manage the last forty feet on my own,” I said sarcastically.

We said our goodbyes, and she was on her way. I pulled off the lanyard. I wasn’t some lost kid on the side of a milk carton. I unzipped my bag and placed the lanyard inside, then went to pull out my phone before changing my mind. I grabbed my book instead. I was getting close to the end, and I wanted to read what was going to happen next.



I looked up from my book. This part of the lounge was getting noisier and busier, with more than half the seats occupied. It was still well over an hour until takeoff. A man and a woman in pilot uniforms, carrying flight bags, walked past me. He had four stripes on his sleeve and she had three, which meant he was the pilot and she was the first officer. He had that sort of “pilot look”—tall, mustachioed and all confident, like he should be in a TV commercial—and she was on the young side, small and with long dark hair. If it weren’t for her uniform, I never would have thought she was a pilot. She hardly looked old enough to be a flight attendant.

They stopped and chatted with the gate agents. He handed the female pilot his flight bag, and she went through the gate and headed down the bridge toward the plane. The gate agent pointed at me, and the pilot nodded and then came in my direction.

“Hello, Jamie.” He smiled and offered his hand, and we shook. “I’m Stuart Daley. I’m a friend of your father’s. He called to let me know you’d be on my flight today.”

I guessed it wasn’t just my grandmother who wanted to have me checked on.

“I’m going to start my preflight checks. Do you want to come along with me?”

“That would be great!”

I got to my feet and packed up my carry-on bag. I followed him through the gate and down the bridge to the plane, then through the door that led down a set of metal steps to the pavement below.

“You ever done an external check before?” he asked.

“On smaller planes, but never on a jet.”

“That’s right. Your father has his own plane. A Cessna, right?”

“Yeah.”

“Do you go up with him sometimes?”

“All the time.”

He grinned. “That’s real flying. My son, Adam, is taking flight lessons in a Cessna. He’s only a few lessons away from his solo. Now, stay close to me as we do the check. It would be a lot of paper-work if you got hit by a belt loader.”

We started circling the plane. It was a fairly new two-engine Boeing. I like Boeing planes. My parents have told me they have great safety records. Captain Daley was checking the wheels, examining the rudders and wings and looking for any visible damage. Walking under the plane, we came up to the baggage handlers putting the luggage on board. He waved, and they waved back as we continued the inspection.

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“Adam and I are also building an ultralight together. A little father-and-son activity.”

“Wow. That’s amazing!” Ultralights are small one- or two-seat planes.

“It’s basically finished except for attaching the wings. If all goes well, we’re going to take it up sometime this month.”

“That’s a lot different than flying one of these,” I said, gazing up at the jet.

“Big difference. That’s being as free as a bird. This plane is so automated it sometimes feels like I’m a computer programmer instead of a pilot.”

We headed back up to the stairs leading to the bridge.

“Does your son want to be a pilot?” I asked.

“That’s the plan. University and then flight school. That’s where I met your father.”

We were greeted at the hatch by a flight attendant.

“Hey, Julia, good to know you’re running the show today,” he said.

“New crew member?” she asked, gesturing to me.

Captain Daley laughed. “Some of our new pilots don’t seem much older than him.”

“Are you talking specifically about me?” a female voice asked.

Just inside the plane sat the woman I’d seen with Captain Daley earlier. Up close she looked even younger.

“Not you specifically, but really, didn’t you get asked for ID when you ordered a beer the other night?” Captain Daley joked.

“Probably something that hasn’t happened to you for a *long, long* time,” she said, laughing.

“No argument there. It’s been a while. Jamie, this is Captain Kim.”

She came over, and as we shook hands, I realized she wasn’t much taller than me.

“I’m pleased to meet you, Captain Kim,” I said.

“I’d much rather you just call me by my first name...Doeun.”

I always addressed pilots more formally, but she’d asked, so I guessed I could do that. Besides, she didn’t look that much older than me.

I nodded. “Doeun. What language is that? And does it have any particular meaning?”

“It’s Korean,” she said. “The first syllable—*Do*—means ‘principle and reason’ and the second syllable—*Eun*—translates to ‘silver,’” she explained.

“Personally, I think she’s worth her weight in gold as a pilot,” Captain Daley said with a chuckle.

“I’m glad you think so,” Doeun replied, grinning. Then her smile faded. “It does get tiresome explaining to airport security that I actually am a pilot.”

I gave her a questioning look.

“This morning they wanted to double-check my ID because they didn’t believe me. Captain Daley had to offer them reassurance.”

“You shouldn’t take it so personally,” Captain Daley replied with a shrug. “This is one of the first times you’ve flown out of here, and they’re just being careful for security reasons.”

“But it *is* personal.” She turned directly to me. “Your father is a pilot. What does he look like?”

I hesitated for a second. “Well, he and Captain Daley could be brothers. My mother is a pilot too.”

“But does she look like me?” Doeun asked, raising her eyebrows.

“She’s older and taller and—”

“And not Asian?” Doeun asked.

I nodded.

“When you first saw me, did you think I was a pilot?” she asked.

“Yeah, of course.”

“You did?” She sounded surprised.

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“You’re wearing the uniform. It’s not like they give them away.” I paused, then added, “My mother told me that to be a female pilot, you have to be better than the males.”

She laughed. “You and I are going to get along just fine. Glad you’re able to join us for our flight today.”

“Me too,” Captain Daley said warmly. “Now, I suppose we should be getting back to the flight. I was hoping Jamie could join us on the flight deck for pre-check.”

I raised my eyebrows. I’d figured I was just going to my seat before the other passengers boarded.

“No problem with me,” she answered.

“I thought it would be nice for you to have somebody closer to your age in the cockpit.” Captain Daley gave me a wink.

Doeun turned to me. “Does your father make the same sort of lame dad jokes?”

“All the time. I thought it was a pilot thing,” I answered.

“Not me. I’m a pilot, but I’m *seriously* cool.”

“And I’m not?” Captain Daley asked.

“Sure you are. Most *definitely*. The *king* of cool,” she replied sarcastically.

“Hey, a little respect for your elders...although I admit you’re pretty cool. Jamie, Doeun is a certified scuba instructor, does some serious free climbing and plays bass in a rock band.”

“And I probably am closer to Jamie’s age than I am to yours.” She turned to me. “I’m twenty-eight, and you’re, what, fifteen?”

“Thirteen.” I often had people thinking I was older because I was tall for my age. I didn’t mind it, since it meant people took me a bit more seriously.

“And Stuart, what are you, fifty-seven, sixty-five...?”

He started laughing. “Forty-five on my next birthday, which means you *are* closer to his age than mine.” He headed through the cockpit door. “Shall we start the checks?”

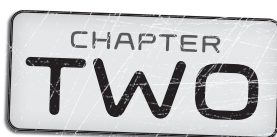
I followed them onto the flight deck. He settled into the pilot seat on the left, and Doeun took the right-hand seat. I pushed down the jump seat behind them and sat.

“Looks like this isn’t your first time on a flight deck,” Doeun said.

“Two pilots as parents means I’ve seen a lot of these,” I said, setting down my bag.

They pulled out their logbooks and started going through the before-takeoff checklist item by item. They were throwing around lots of technical terms and numbers that I didn’t understand. I knew it was best never to disturb a pilot during this process.

I reached into my bag and pulled out my book again. I was coming up to a good part—the asteroid was getting ready to hit Earth and would probably kill all life on the surface. Thank goodness the main characters were part of a survival group—random people who’d come together and were relocating to caves and caverns well below ground level. They’d survive the apocalypse. At least, I hoped they would.



CHAPTER
TWO

"JAMIE?"

I looked up.

"That must be a pretty good book," Doeun said.

"It is." I turned it so she could see the cover.

"*End of Days*. Sounds like dystopian, end-of-the-world stuff."

I nodded. "It's my favorite genre."

"Mine too. You must have read *The Hunger Games*."

"Yeah, but I also like the classics, like *Brave New World* and *1984*."

"See, I thought you two kids might have things in common,"
Captain Daley said.

Julia walked onto the flight deck. "Here's the flight manifest." She handed the papers to Doeun. "Baggage is stowed, and, with one exception, all the passengers are in their seats."

"Oh yeah, right." I got up.

"Actually, we were wondering if you'd be interested in staying up here for the entire flight," Captain Daley said.

“Up here, definitely!” I grinned. “If that’s allowed.”

“We make exceptions for certain employees and their families. Besides, I’m the captain, so unless somebody has an objection, you can stay.”

“Good with me,” Doeun said.

“Just one less passenger in the back. I’d be willing to send you a few more,” Julia said. She retreated, closing the cockpit door. There was a loud click to signify it was now locked.

“We still have twenty-five minutes to push back if you want to read some more.”

“Great. Thanks.”

I was turning back to my book when a message came over the radio. “Flight 751, this is the tower. We have a departure window that’s just opened if you’re able to leave slightly early. Over.”

“This is flight 751. How soon is that window opening and closing?” Captain Daley asked.

“Opens in five and closes in ten minutes.”

“Copy. Will be able to take advantage. Slot us in.”

“I’ll check with the crew,” Doeun said.

Before she could, a message came over the PA.

“Attention,” Julia announced, “doors are armed and cross-checked.”

“That’s our signal,” Captain Daley said. He took the PA. “Good afternoon, passengers, this is Captain Daley, and I have some unexpected news. We are not going to be leaving at our original time. Instead we’re going to be departing twenty-five minutes ahead of schedule.”

A cheer came from the back of the plane.

“We have clear skies and no reports of turbulence. Our flight time will be two hours and thirty minutes, and with a tail wind and the early start, we can expect to arrive thirty-five minutes ahead of schedule. I hope you enjoy your flight.”

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After a few more communications with air traffic control, we were nearly set to go. Once the pilots finished their pre-taxi checklist, they engaged the controls, and the plane shuddered and then started slowly backward. I knew that these first few feet could be the most delicate. With their long wings, aircraft at terminals crowded with other planes and then on busy tarmacs filled with service vehicles and other aircraft are at risk of colliding with other vehicles. Some of the worst accidents in aviation history happened on the ground. Takeoffs and landings are the most risky parts of flight.

I looked at the panel. There were so many controls and dials and levers. Some were lit and others blinked as the pilots activated them or turned them off. I looked out the windshield as we swung out and the top of the terminal disappeared. We slowed to a stop and then started moving again, this time forward. The engines got louder as we picked up speed and bumped along. I listened to the messages flying back and forth between the two pilots, the air traffic controller and the cabin crew.

We came to a stop on the taxiway, and a big jet came racing along the runway in front of us. This was all part of the dance going on around us, with planes landing, taking off and taxiing, and the support vehicles loading or unloading baggage and fueling the planes.

We started forward again, the engines roared louder, and we sped up. We were swinging around, which meant we were coming up to our runway. We stopped, and the engine noise lessened.

“Looks like we’re third in line,” Doeun said. She turned slightly around. “*Walking Dead* fan?”

“Graphic novel or the TV show?” I asked.

“Both.”

“Love the graphic novels and the first five or six seasons of the show.”

Doeun gave a thumbs-up. “Perfect answer. We’ll talk more when we’re in flight.”

We bumped forward again. I figured we were now second for takeoff.

“Where are your parents today?” Captain Daley asked.

“My mother just got back from a long-haul to Europe, and my father has a couple of days off.”

“That’s always precious time when everybody is home.” It was true. I was looking forward to us all being together. It didn’t happen very often.

“Flight 751, you are cleared for takeoff,” the air traffic controller said.

“Roger that,” Captain Daley replied. “Captain Kim, you have the controls.”

She placed her hands firmly on the control column. She was the pilot flying. Captain Daley put a hand on the throttle and slowly began to push it forward, giving the plane thrust. He was monitoring the controls and could use the throttle to stop the flight in the event of an emergency. We started moving along the runway, gaining speed.

“Thirty knots...thirty-five...forty,” Captain Daley called out.

He kept announcing the numbers as he pushed the throttle forward and the engines got louder, the rumbling stronger, the bumping more pronounced.

“Sixty-five...seventy...”

I could feel us lifting off, and I sat up as high as I could in my seat, trying to look through the windshield. Then there was a gigantic thump and bounce as we hit back down to the runway!

“Abort, abort, abort takeoff!” Captain Daley yelled.



CHAPTER
THREE

“WE’VE LOST ALL POWER!” Doeun called out.

The lights on the panel were dark, and the light I’d been using for reading was out.

“Executing emergency braking!” Captain Daley exclaimed.

The plane was bumping along, but there was no sound from the engines. They had died along with all the lights and controls.

“I’m struggling to keep it running straight. It’s pulling to the left!” Doeun said.

Her voice was calm, but I could hear the fear in her words.

“Slowing down...slowing down...no readings.”

Captain Daley grabbed the PA. “Assume crash positions. Everybody assume—”

He realized the PA was as dead as everything else.

“Braking, braking, braking,” he said.

“Are we going to run out of runway?” Doeun asked.

“It’ll be close. Reducing speed.”

There was another big bump, and only the buckle kept me from flying out of my seat. I could hear screaming coming from the cabin. There was more bumping and then we came to a stop. Silence. No engines, no radio, no conversation. A cloud of dust and dirt appeared in the front of the plane. We were tilted on an angle, pitched slightly forward.

“What happened?” I gasped.

“We lost all power,” Captain Daley said. “We lost everything.”

“Tower, this is flight 751...and there’s no radio,” Doeun said.

“Let’s get everybody onto the tarmac,” Captain Daley said. “Jamie, you stay close to me.”

The two of them undid their buckles, and I did the same. Captain Daley opened the cockpit door to the sound of screaming and crying. The cabin was dim, but I could see that some things had fallen out of the overhead bins. Julia and the other flight attendants were giving orders for people to be calm and stay in their seats. Some people had already gotten up and were removing their luggage. The flight attendants had them sit back down.

“What happened?” Julia asked.

“Catastrophic power loss in all systems. Any injuries?” Captain Daley answered.

“I don’t think anything too serious. We’re deploying the emergency slides.”

I could see the other two flight attendants—one male and the other female—working to remove the emergency exit doors. I was trying not to freak out. It helped that they seemed so in control. Doeun and Julia went to open the main cabin hatch. They opened the door and tossed it out and to the side. There was a sudden hiss, and I saw the slide inflate.

“You go first,” Julia said to me. “Help people at the bottom.”

Before I could even think to react, she moved me over to the door. I hesitated a half second and then, with a little push on the

back, I hit the slide. I shot down to the bottom and quickly jumped to my feet. We weren't on the runway anymore. We were on a grassy section, and at the front was a high stone fence topped with metal and barbed wire. The nose of the plane was *over* the fence. We'd stopped within feet of crashing into it. This was unbelievable.

I startled back to reality as a woman hit the slide, screaming as she came barreling down. I reached out for her arm and grabbed her as she hit the bottom. She looked shocked and scared. I pulled her over to the side just before a man came shooting down behind her.

"Jump and slide!" Julia yelled from the top.

Another woman came down, and the man and myself braced her at the bottom. I looked past him to where two other slides were operating. More people were coming down and starting to gather on the ground. It was all happening so quickly.

Julia came down the slide next, and Captain Daley appeared at the top.

"I'm going to do a full search of the plane," he called down and then disappeared.

I caught sight of his head passing by one porthole and then a second, and after that I couldn't see him anymore. Julia and the other two flight attendants were moving passengers away from the plane. A couple needed to be helped by others, and I could see some blood oozing from a man's head. Maybe he'd been hit by falling luggage.

"We don't have answers yet," Julia yelled out in response to all the questions that were being thrown at her by a few vocal passengers.

Lots of people were sitting down on the grass. There was a man in a wheelchair, and I thought he must be injured. Then I remembered seeing him in the terminal in his chair. He and the woman standing beside him had matching track suits and medals around their necks. Some of the people were in tears, others looked shocked or scared or angry. I couldn't tell how I felt yet.

“Where are the emergency vehicles?” Doeun asked. “They should be on the way by now.”

I looked toward the terminal. Nobody was coming. Nothing was moving. There were other planes stopped on the runway, frozen in place. The terminal looked dark. The lights on the tower and on the antenna and communication arrays were dark.

“What’s happening?” I asked. There was a catch in my voice—I felt uneasy even asking.

“It wasn’t just our plane. It’s the tower, the terminal and other planes,” Doeun replied.

Captain Daley came down the slide at the back of the aircraft. He must have finished the search and found the plane abandoned. He brushed past passengers and questions and came over to where Doeun and I stood.

“This is really wrong,” he said. “I’m not sure what happened—or what’s still happening.”

I turned back toward the plane and looked beyond the fence at the road. It was lined with cars, but none of them were moving. People were out of their vehicles. Had they stopped to stare at us? Then, beyond the rows of stopped traffic and buildings, I saw a pillar of black smoke rising into the air. And a second pillar rose up, farther in the distance. Two planes had taken off just before us.

“Okay, everybody, can I have your attention!” Captain Daley yelled out, and the crowd went silent. “I know you all have lots of questions, but the important thing is that we’re safe and off the plane.”

“But it’s more than just our plane, isn’t it?” a man called out.

That was pretty obvious, but it didn’t mean Captain Daley knew what was happening.

“We need to move to the terminal. Let’s help those who are injured, get medical aid and answers. We’re all okay,” he answered.

We started moving. The flight attendants were keeping us in a group, like sheepdogs guarding a flock of sheep. One man was

leaning heavily against another, hopping on one leg, and two men were carrying a woman between them.

People were pulling out their cell phones. That was a great idea—I could call my granny and let her know I was fine. I had to talk to her before this hit the news, and then I'd ask her to call my parents. I pulled it out and turned it on. There was nothing. Not just no signal, but nothing. The phone was dark and dead. Was it out of power? Then I noticed it wasn't just my phone. Others were holding up their phones and looking at them, but nobody was actually using them. They were complaining that their phones were dead. Had the cell towers also lost all power?

Off to the side another plane had its emergency slides out, and there were more crowds on the tarmac. Then I started looking farther away. There were other planes sitting on the runways and taxiways, and none of them were moving. I could see a dozen from here. Just then, right before my eyes, the emergency chutes of another plane activated. Every plane out here was evacuating their passengers and crew.

"I don't get it," I said. "What is this? What could cause all of this?"

"I have no idea," Julia replied, looking shaken. "But it's all the planes. All at once. And there are no emergency vehicles or baggage trams or even supervisory cars or trucks moving. And no cell phones. Why would there be no cell phones or radios?"

A passenger started yelling at another flight attendant. He was demanding answers about what was going on. Another passenger joined in, and then another and another.

"You stay right with me," Julia said. "You are not to leave my side for any reason."

She walked toward the agitated passengers, but before she could get there, Captain Daley and Doeun were at the scene. I expected Captain Daley to calmly reassure them. That wasn't what happened.

“Stop it *now!*” Captain Daley yelled. “You harass my crew and I’m going to have you arrested as soon as we reach the terminal. Do you understand?”

The first man mumbled something I couldn’t hear, and the second edged away, looking at his feet. The third shut up, looking like a little boy caught doing something wrong.

Captain Daley turned to face the passengers from our plane. “Let me be honest. I don’t know what’s happening. I’m going to get you back to the terminal, and we’re going to take care of things and take care of you. Panicking or getting angry is not going to solve anything.” He was trying to sound calm and reassuring, but I figured he was as scared and confused as the rest of us.

A number of passengers yelled out encouragement and agreement.

We started walking again. There were other groups off to the side and behind us. Everybody was headed to the terminal. Our group merged with another, and then some baggage handlers joined in. We started up a ramp, and some firefighters came running out of the building, carrying all their equipment. Off in the distance a plane was fully engulfed in flames. It looked as if the hull had shattered in two, like it had smashed down hard against the runway. Had this plane been landing when it lost power? Is this what would have happened to us if we’d been two minutes earlier and already in the air? I felt a chill go up my spine, and my legs suddenly felt wobbly. We’d been seconds away from crashing.

“Everybody inside,” Julia yelled. “Everybody into the terminal.”



CHAPTER
FOUR

JULIA CAME OVER TO WHERE I was sitting and stooped down so that we were eye to eye.

“How are you doing?”

I shook my head. “I don’t know...stunned.”

“We’re all stunned. At least it’s quiet now. I’m surprised that the backup generator hasn’t come on yet,” Julia said. “This is a post-disaster facility. Things like the backup generator are supposed to work no matter what has happened.”

There was plenty of light streaming through the terminal windows, but the lights themselves hadn’t come back on.

“Just sit tight. We’re going to get more information and figure things out in the next few minutes,” she said.

I politely nodded my head, although I thought there was no way they were going to figure out anything that quickly. What we knew was that whatever had happened had affected everything. Planes that were on the ground lost power and couldn’t get up,

and those already in the air had either glided in for a landing or crashed. We also didn't have any "ears." All radio and cell-phone communication had stopped at the exact same second. There were no computers. Out in front of the terminal, hundreds of vehicles had just stopped dead in their tracks.

I'd been told that people had been sent out of the terminal and outside the boundaries of the airport to investigate. They reported that some of the clouds of black smoke we could see were planes that had crashed. I thought again how we had been no more than a few seconds away from getting into the air. I could be dead right now. If we had already been in the air, we would have crashed. I couldn't get my head around it.

Two more of the planes that had crashed had been coming in for a landing. There was the one we'd seen in flames and shattered, and the other had managed to hit the ground on a glide pattern. Nobody had died, but there were walking wounded—sprains and cuts and bruises. Others' injuries were more serious and were being treated in the terminal infirmary. Medical staff had wanted to transfer them to the nearest hospital, but there were no ambulances running.

People who lived locally had been advised to leave the terminal and go home. Nobody seemed to need much encouragement. They all wanted out. Some people's destinations were only a few miles away, while others had a thirty- or forty-mile journey. That would have been a short car or taxi ride if there were cars or taxis still running. Instead it was going to be a long walk. How long would it take to walk that far?

Others had been given chits to stay at the hotels used by the airlines. There were a couple dozen hotels that weren't far away, and people would be able to walk there. It wasn't like anyone had much luggage. Everything except their carry-ons were locked in the cargo holds of the planes or the basement of the terminal.

I tried to figure out where my granny would be. She had dropped me off two hours before my flight, and her place was a ninety-minute drive from the airport. If she had left immediately, she would have gotten home. Then again, maybe this was something that had hit just around the airport. Maybe everything was still okay where she was. I'd thought about how long it would take to walk to my granny's house. Even if I knew the way, it was still almost a hundred miles. It might as well be on the moon.

My parents would have heard about this by now and would be worried. No, they would be *terrified*. At least they would have been reassured that I was still on the ground when it happened. Since our flight wasn't scheduled to leave so early, they'd have made that assumption. They wouldn't know that we'd been just seconds away from lifting off and crashing down.

Julia and I watched as Captain Daley and Doeun, along with the two other flight attendants—Fede and Amanda—came out from the airline's back room.

"Maybe we're going to get some more answers," Julia said, gesturing to them.

Judging by their expressions, they had either no news or bad news.

"It looks like this is widespread," Captain Daley reported. "A member of the control tower also operates a ham radio and has been in communication with some of his buddies."

I frowned. "What's a ham radio?"

"Ham radio uses specific radio frequencies for people to communicate, to talk to each other. Some people do it as a hobby."

"And those radios still work?" Julia asked.

Captain Daley nodded. "Some of them. Those that have battery-powered backup or generators. And he thinks the ones that are still working are the older models," Captain Daley said. "Those with transistors."

“As opposed to computer chips?” Fede asked.

He spoke with a Spanish accent. He had been calm and reassuring and friendly with the passengers, even when things were breaking down.

“All the things that are *not* working have computer chips,” Fede added.

Captain Daley looked thoughtful. “That might be the case, but I’d say it’s a little early to confirm that.”

“Those ham radios don’t have a very large broadcast reach, do they?” Julia asked.

“They do have limits,” Doeun confirmed. “But the signals can ripple out from one operator to the next.”

She turned to me and realized from my expression that I was confused.

“Let’s say you yelled out hello at the top of your lungs to somebody a hundred yards that way.” She pointed down the lobby of the terminal. “They could hear you and then turn and yell to somebody else a hundred yards farther along, who could turn to somebody a hundred yards down from there. Ultimately you could get a message to somebody a hundred *miles* away if there were enough people.”

“Right,” I said. “So this guy here on the radio has talked to others, who’ve talked to others, who’ve talked to others even farther away.”

“Exactly,” Captain Daley replied. “We know that this outage is in effect for at least five hundred miles in all directions.”

Doeun covered her mouth in shock. “That’s huge!” she exclaimed. I felt a chill go down my spine.

“That means we probably don’t have anybody who can give us answers or help us out. Not now and maybe not for a while,” Captain Daley said.

I could tell he was working hard to sound calm and in control. That was what pilots did. They were trained to hide their emotions. And fears.

— CHAPTER SAMPLER —
FLIGHT PLAN

“Which means we’re on our own,” Doeun added.

“It would be easier if we were,” Captain Daley said. “But we have a plane out there and dozens of passengers who are our responsibility.”

“And just how are we going to play out that responsibility?” Julia asked, eyebrows raised.

“By doing first things first. Amanda”—he pointed to her—“you’re based here in Chicago, right?”

“Yes, I live in Naperville. It’s about twenty-five miles away,” Amanda said in a quiet voice.

“And that’s where you live with your husband and kids.”

“Yes. We have three children.”

“You need to head home.”

She furrowed her brow. “I don’t want to desert the rest of you and the passengers.”

Captain Daley spoke firmly. “You’re not deserting us. You’re going to be with your family. I’m just sorry I can’t offer you a way to get there.”

“If I start walking now,” she said, “I can be there in seven hours. Thank you. Thank you so much.” She paused. “I suppose I’d better get going.”

She exchanged hugs with the rest of the flight crew and then hurried off. I wished I were just a few hours from home instead of twelve hundred miles. If I walked twenty-five miles a day, it would take almost fifty days to get there. But I realized, in a strange way, knowing the exact length of that journey was almost reassuring.

“What about the rest of us?” Fede asked, looking to the captain.

“Somebody needs to secure our plane by staying with it.”

“I can do that,” Doeun said.

“And I can help her,” Fede offered.

“Excellent,” Captain Daley said. “Julia, you and I, along with Jamie, are going to go back to the hotel where all our passengers were sent.”

— CHAPTER SAMPLER —
ERIC WALTERS

“I’m not sure what we can do for them,” she said nervously.

“Neither am I. I just know that once they set foot on our plane, they became our responsibility, and we can’t just abandon them.”

“I guess you’re right,” she agreed.

“Then I suggest we get to it. Doeun, we’ll be back tomorrow, probably early.”

“That sounds good,” Doeun said. “And who knows, maybe by tomorrow everything will be back up and working.”

Captain Daley didn’t answer. I wanted him to agree with her, but really, what did he know? What did anybody know?