

DRAMATIC NARRATIVE!

The following short story is a powerful, action packed tale that keeps the reader's attention throughout.

TEN SECONDS TO DISASTER

Crouched in the tiny cockpit of the Skystreak rocket-plane, test-pilot Mitch Rawson licked his lips, hesitated, then flicked the firing stud of Number One engine. Instantly, as the rocket booster caught with a shattering blast of power, the giant thrust of acceleration crammed him back in his seat. He fired the second engine, then the third, and fourth. Already, the Skystreak was through the sound barrier, slashing forward on a mighty pillar of flame.

Mitch glanced at the spinning dials. He looked ahead through the windscreen, at the long, lance-like nose probe, slicing through infinity. Soon, as he entered the heat barrier, the probe's heat-resistant skin would turn cherry-red before his eyes. If his refrigeration system failed, Mitch knew that he would be roasted alive in seconds. He shivered, feeling suddenly afraid of the incredible forces that he must tame...and control.

Now the Skystreak was pushed to the limit of its endurance. With his speed approaching forty miles per minute, the rocket fuel would burn out. Then Mitch would point the nose of the aircraft earthwards. As his speed increased, the nose probe would glow with heat. The slightest tremor could develop into an uncontrollable yaw. Then would come the worst moment of all ...the pull-out, at thirty thousand feet, the tremendous pressure on the airframe.

What happened then was anyone's guess. The Skystreak might stand the stress. Or it might crumple and fall, like a broken box-kite...He switched his microphone to 'send', forced himself to speak calmly. "Ground Control from Z1. Burn-out. Diving...now!"

Slowly, Mitch pushed the control column forward. A mild vibration built up in the airframe. Now the Skystreak was pointing straight down, aimed earthwards like a ballistic missile.

"Height, sixty thousand...speed, two thousand two hundred."

For the first time, with the cloud layer rushing at his eyes, Mitch felt the raw clutch of fear. It wouldn't be long now. Then the cloud was all around him, a thick grey blanket. He began to tighten back on the stick, his wide, sweating eyes fixed on the shuddering nose probe. At fifty miles a minute, the Skystreak slashed clear of the cloud.

It came without warning, a terrible, searing flash, almost scorching his eyes. Instinctively, his hands jerked away from the controls, shielding his face from the blinding light. His mouth opened in a great, soundless scream as the Skystreak yawed sharply with the sudden loss of control. His hands jerked back to the stick. But it was too late. The tortured screech of cracking metal flooded his ears. His eyes cleared. He saw the nose probe, swinging in ever increasing circles. Slowly, horribly, the probe began to disintegrate. Something whirled past the windscreen, a tattered fragment of mainplane. The earth smashed up at Mitch, reeling and spinning in the clear sunlight. He was crashing.

He was crashing...he was going to die!

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