

The Last Deadline.

By S.A. Thurtle

Henry Roberts sat at his computer and read how the world would end.

On an email. Of all the ways to find out, this seemed the most surreal.

Insulting, almost.

He reached the bottom and the last line, “this is not a drill.” Leaning back in his chair, he drummed his fingers on the green leather of his desk, staring at the email through the small glasses perched on his nose. Leaning forward again, he scrolled back to the top, checked the email and email header. Nothing funny there. It looked legit.

Without taking his eyes of the screen, he reached over and picked up his desk phone, and punched in the number for IT.

The phone rang once, “Yes, Chief, how can...”

“I’ve just received an email; can you check that it’s legitimate?” Henry barked.

“Yes, when did you receive it?”

“Ten minutes ago. The email is a FEMA one and the subject is...”

“Preparatory notice confidential?”

“That’s the one.”

“Okay, leave it with me, I’ll...”

“Email me back in two minutes or find a new job.” Henry said, slamming the phone down with a sweaty hand.

Whilst he waited, Henry went back to the top and started reading again, slowly, line-by-line. Taking notes as he went. Tracking key points and questions that the text presented. It might have been a while since he was on a desk or a journalist of any type, but the instincts were still there.

Where was the story? What were they trying not to tell him?

As he reached the bottom a new email arrived. The IT geek confirming what his gut already knew.

It was the real deal.

Henry leaned back in his chair, his breath coming faster, a cold sweat on his brow.

No, this couldn't be it. Could it?

He scrolled to the top again and dialled the features desk, Teddy answered, "What's up Chief?"

"Who's covering science at the moment?"

"We have Edgar Robins on that one."

"Get him in here, come too." Again, Henry slammed the phone down, his eyes straying to the top draw of his desk as he waited.

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Five minutes later, Teddy and Edgar walked into the Henry's office, chatting as they came. One glance at Henry and both fell silent.

“Okay, Chief, how concerned should I be?” Teddy asked, walking towards his Boss’s desk.

Henry, usually immaculate, sat, tie off, the first two shirt buttons undone. Next to him a large, open bottle of expensive bourbon, the top three inches empty. Their contents in the glass in Henry’s hand, a cigarette burning in the other. He laughed, “Very. Sit.” He said gesturing to the two chairs in front of him.

The two men complied, exchanging dark looks.

Taking a deep draw on his cigarette, Henry closed his eyes, opened them, blew it out shakily, and turned to Edgar, “You had a story last week, something you wanted to run?”

Caught off guard, Edgar stuttered, “I... yes, we had notifications from NOAA about solar activity being higher than usual this cycle...”

“NOAA?” Henry asked.

“National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, they monitor and predict space weather.”

“Isn’t that NASA?”

“No, NASA go to NOAA. It’s... probably a way to get more funding or something. I don’t know. Either way NOAA let us know we had some potentially damaging space weather on the way.”

“That’s a thing? What do you mean damaging? And keep it simple, okay? I know I’m your Executive Editor but, for now, speak to me like I’m an idiot.”

Edgar looked at Teddy who shrugged and raised his eyebrows, “Okay, so, the sun is on a pretty regular eleven-year cycle. The activity on its surface rises and falls in that time. When it gets towards peak season, it starts to fire all kinds of material into space. When that happens, we call it a solar flare, okay?”

Henry nodded, taking a deep drink and gesturing for him to continue.

“Okay, so we’re close to the peak of activity for this period and the sun is sending off some impressive solar flares. NOAA have a ranking system, they

have a letter system, A, B, C, M and X, then a severity in number form from 1 to 20. We don't really care about them until they're in the X band, then they start being an issue."

"An issue how?"

"Well, they can interfere with communications, GPS, power systems, it depends how bad it gets. NOAA warned that we could expect a flare in the X 1.2 to 1.8 band, which could impact or even damage some satellites."

Henry laughed, tried to take a drink, and found his glass empty. Teddy watched as he put the glass down and refilled it, almost to the top with a shaking hand. "Henry. What the hell is going on?" he said.

"Oh, you know, a normal day in the life of a news media executive editor." He said bitterly, taking a deep drink.

"Really? Cos, last I heard, you quit smoking and drinking when you got the pacemaker fitted."

Henry ignored him, stood up and went to the window, staring out at the busy city below him. “I’ve worked my way up from the ground here, did you know that?” he said eventually.

“Yes, you’ve mentioned.” Teddy replied, confused.

“I bet I have. You know what I’ve seen in that time? I was here when the Clarkson administration came apart. Broke part of that story myself. The financial crash in 2008, the massed layoffs, did that too. And when those terrorists blew up those school buses downtown? All those kids died. I was first on the scene.” Henry looked over at the award on the wall from his work that day. “But I don’t have the first fucking clue what to do today. I don’t even know...” his voice broke, shoulders slumped.

“Henry? What’s going on? Maybe if you let us know we can help you with this?” Edgar said, standing up and walking up behind Henry, putting a hand on the old man’s shoulder.

Henry laughed again, his voice bitter, “That would be impressive.” He walked away from the other man’s touch and sat back at his desk, “Sit down.” He said, his voice cold and hard, more like normal, “This doesn’t leave this room for now. Not until we’ve verified every detail, and we have

permission, is that understood?” the two men nodded, and he continued, “NOAA were wrong. I’ve been notified by FEMA that current estimates are that within the next week we will experience an X18 or 19 event.”

“Sorry, 1.8 you mean?” Edgar said, looking confused.

“No, they wrote the words, not just the numbers. The email describes this as a cataclysmic event which will send most of the planet back to the dark ages and there’s not a thing, we can do about it.”

Edgar flopped back into his seat, his face white in shock.

Teddy looked from Henry to Edgar and back again, “Sorry? What have I missed here? The dark ages? What do you mean?”

When he replied, his voice was cold, quiet, “When this thing hits, anything with a battery, wire, chip, or a screen will be destroyed. Not just stop, but there’s a chance that the wires in homes will catch fire. No electricity, no communications, cars, aeroplanes, all the gear in hospitals, the whole lot. Boom. Dead.”

Teddy laughed, “But surely the government have a way to protect us or some of this from...” he looked between the two, seeing the answer in their faces.

“It’s all going to be gone. Over. The internet, finance, records, everything not written down? The DoD is trying to get records stored in several underground facilities but they’re fairly certain it’s a futile effort.” Henry said, taking another deep pull on his drink. “The powers that be aren’t sure when this will take place, and, when it does, we’ll have between 8 and 15 seconds before it hits us.”

“Jesus Christ.” Teddy said, now just as white as Edgar.

Henry dropped his cigarette butt into a cold cup of coffee, took another and lit it, before offering the other two. Both refused, but Teddy gestured to the bourbon. Henry nodded, pulled a pair of glasses from his desk, and pour them both a glass full. They took their glasses and lifted them.

“To the end of our civilisation, Gentlemen.” Henry said and took a deep drink, the other two looked shocked, then took a drink as well.

Henry set his glass down, “We have been asked to aid the government in preparing the public and business for what they call our ‘post-technology era,’ which is some bullshit. We need something better than that. We’ll be given permission to start airing this within the next 24 hours, and, by then need a range of content to deliver across all our channels. We need to prepare people for the loss of mass transport systems including all air transport, impact on water supply, and food supply. We also need to get the population to step away from anything with electronics in and batteries, so their phones. Just in case they explode when the wave hits. Importantly, we also need to let them know about the imminent shutdown of certain power generation sites, specifically the nuclear facilities.”

“Will that work? Just shutting them down?” Edgar asked, sounding sceptical.

“From the email, they’re not sure. But they are sure that solar radiation bombarding an active nuclear power station is worse.”

Edgar laughed; his tone high pitched with the implications of it all.

“We also need to prepare a set of explanatory videos covering what happens before, during and after the event to...” Henry looked at the email again and read “...stop people panicking.” Henry said, an eyebrow raised.

“People will panic.” Teddy said, “Most of what they take for granted is about to stop, explode or both.”

Henry nodded, “Yep, there’s no way we can stop the average person from panicking. We also can’t stop the conspiracy nut jobs from spinning their rubbish on the internet. But we have to try. It’s what we’re for, to inform the man on the street.”

Teddy sighed, rubbed his eyes, then looked back at Henry, “Okay, we can’t stop them from panicking, but maybe we can slow down the panic a bit.

What if we got Mavis to front this?”

“Mavis Brink? The Queen of Daytime?” Henry said.

“Well, she’s on the same network, people trust her. That could be...” Teddy said, voice vanishing as the reality of what they were discussing hit him again.

Henry looked at the two men, feeling their fear and weight of the responsibility. He felt it himself, the rising fear and hysteria. If the eggheads were right, then the world was going to change with nearly no notice. There would be that moment, then everything after. Nothing they could do. No where to run. He felt his mouth go dry, palms sweaty, Henry closed his eyes and took a deep breath. It's not the time for panic, pity and fear. There would be time for that later. For now, he was still an Executive Editor, he had a job to do and staff to keep moving.

“Right, it might be the end of the world, but we have a job to do, and you’re being paid by the hour. Go, use the facilities, get coffee. Get yourselves together. Pick up your little black books of numbers, laptops, and notepads. You’re now planning to break the news of the end of the world with me. We’re on a deadline gentlemen, and I have no idea when it is.”

The two men stood up, his instructions pushing down the fear for now. Edgar left quickly but Teddy paused in the door as another thought struck him.

“What is it Teddy, speak your mind.” Henry said.

Teddy turned to look at his boss closely, opened his mouth to speak, stopped and turned to go again.

“Yes, I’ve thought of that too.” Henry said, stopping Teddy again.

“Is there anything we can...” Teddy said, his voice heavy.

“No. Why do you think I’m smoking? As soon as that waves hits everything goes pop. Every computer, phone, TV... and pacemaker. Just like the one in my chest.” Henry said, tapping himself in the chest, his voice stronger than he felt.

“I’m so sorry, Henry.” Teddy said, turning to look at his friend.

“I’ve been on borrowed time since they fitted it, the kids are grown, Mary left me years ago and I’m not dead yet. What I have is this paper and we’ve got a job to do. It’s our job to report what people need to know about this, to hold the government to account, to ensure they’re telling the whole truth and people know the truth. It’s what we’re for. If we don’t do it, someone else will with an agenda. So, go, and get your ass back here. I’ll be damned if this is breaking on social media or any of our competitors before us and there’s no way I’m sorting this out on my own.”

Teddy nodded and slipped out the door.

Henry drained his glass, looked at the bottle, replaced the cork before putting it, the glasses, and cigarettes back in his drawer.

His eyes returned to the last line of the email again, it's the end of the world as we know it and no, this time it's not a drill.

He read through his notes from the email, then, flipping over to a new page in his notebook, Henry got to work.

He had a deadline, the most literal one of his life.