

## **“Perfect Storm”**

**A short story by**

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### **Memphis, Tennessee - 24 hours after the event**

*It's not too late.*

A total of 160 hearts stopped beating all at once on that highway, all but the lucky guy on the gurney. Jocelyn felt that pressure looming in the emergency room as her hands hovered over the gaping wound in his chest. It was a miracle that he was alive but, with so many disasters that had unfolded so far, she knew they were bound for at least one.

“Hold him down,” she told Donna, the nurse, as the man’s pained cries pierced the air.

His howls dulled quickly after she injected him with the sedative.

“How in the world did he survive?” Donna asked Jocelyn.

A reasonable question. When an A320 Airbus plane has to make an emergency landing - or maybe ‘controlled crash’ is more appropriate - on a highway with no way of communicating to air traffic control and no way of warning those below, how does one survive that? Jocelyn owed the nurse an answer - less than 24 hours ago, Donna had been preparing for her honeymoon until it happened. On what should have been a day of joy for the young woman she had instead seen more blood, broken bones, and dead bodies than she would have in a lifetime, even for a nurse.

“It missed his arteries, and they got him here in good time, so he didn’t lose too much blood. One of the plane’s seats must’ve been flung out from the plane and smashed into his car.”

“What do we do now?”

Jocelyn took as deep a breath as she could, feeling like a part of that plane’s debris was stuck in her chest too. But she had to keep her cool, the whole hospital was looking to her - there was nobody else that they could turn to.

“He’s stable for the moment. Now, we go take care of the others.”

No one on the flight from Dallas to Nashville survived the impact, another eight were killed and 27 seriously injured when the plane slammed into the highway and careened through 30 or so cars. But they weren’t the only disasters to come out of what everyone on TV was

calling 'The Event'. At least, that's what they were calling it right up until all the TVs went blank at the same time as everything else shut down, including the hospital's generators.

The whole western hemisphere of the planet had been afflicted by hundreds, if not thousands, of disasters, big and small. Estimates had the casualty list in the United States alone at 2538 within the first 24 hours, and that number would probably increase when communications were finally re-established. There was panic, barely any official controls in place, and no way to find out any news. Which, if you looked at it one way, wasn't so bad. The only "good news" in Memphis right now was how many patients were 'lucky' to get away with just an amputation or two. Jocelyn knew that it was surgeons like her that could keep the death count as low as possible, which, even then, depended on emergency responders finding victims and getting them to the hospitals quickly enough.

Jocelyn and Donna carefully made their way through the hospital hallway. There were hundreds more just like him pouring in, literally filling up the hallways. Only the emergency lighting was on, and the batteries were low - they'd flicked on the moment all the power shut down 24 hours ago. There were no windows here, hand-held torches served as the only light. The gloom seemed to be exacerbated by all of the chatter, the crying, and the chaos. It was like they were wading through hell.

"What's going to happen to him?" Donna's voice cut through the darkness.

"He'll go into surgery as soon as a theatre is free."

"Surgery with no power, can we even do that?"

"We have no choice."

Jocelyn reached the end of the hallway, swung open the double doors, and stepped out into the candlelit room that had become a makeshift triage and reception. Crowds of patients were bunched up across the benches, others stood along the walls, and those who couldn't stand were sitting in groups on the floor. A middle-aged man rushed through the crowd, toward Jocelyn and Donna, crying as he staggered through.

"Let me through, I have to see my son," he yelled. Some of the patients had to hold him back.

"Sir, I'm going to need you to calm down," she said, more calmly than she felt. "No one comes in or out of those doors without my permission."

"Calm down? It took me two hours to drive here, let me through."

“We’ve got a system in place, everyone seriously injured goes through, everyone else waits here. This is how we prevent order from turning into chaos. I won’t allow the mayhem out there to spill into this hospital.”

“Please! My son. He was in a car-” he started to plead, but she cut him off.

“I’m sorry, sir-”

“No, he’s been here a week, since before The Event. He was in a car crash. He was on life support. Let me see him!”

Jocelyn swore she heard a loud tone resonate through the room - the sound of a flatline. She knew that if his son had been on life support, he was probably dead. Just like everyone else on life support. The Event had wiped out everything, even the backup generators to the backup generators. No one from the hospital could have contacted him, the phones were also down since it happened. There was nothing she could do.

A thought punctured Jocelyn’s brain; *how long will this go on for?*

### **International Space Station (ISS) - 0 hours after the event**

“Who knows how long it could be,” Marcus said to Lucy.

“But surely there are plans, precautions-”

“Did you not hear what Houston said before they went down?” Marcus snapped, the stress of everything was getting to him.

The radio had gone silent a few minutes earlier. Marcus and Lucy were gathered in the Unity module with the other four astronauts on the ISS. They all just floated there, waiting. The two Russian cosmonauts stood by the windows, staring helplessly at the Earth.

“Are we sure the readings were correct?” Yuri, one of the Russians, asked no one in particular.

“The US sunk billions into an AI designed to predict these things, it would have filtered through the data several times before giving the warning,” Danny O’Leary, their Mission Commander, replied. “I mean, it might have gotten it wrong. God, I hope it did.”

“Maybe it was just a safety precaution?” Lucy’s hopeful tone was weakening.

“Let’s hope so.”

Two seconds later, the Americans heard the Russians gasp.

“There, it’s coming up now!” Ivan announced, and everyone rushed to the windows to get a look.

The ISS was drifting over the night/day line into the dark side of the planet, quickly approaching the east coast of North America. They had all seen the continent hundreds of times before, all illuminated by bunches of lights, each representing bustling cities, busy highways, sacred homes, vulnerable people, but now, after The Event, the whole of North and South America was completely dark.

Breath left the station. It felt like the heavy thumps of everybody’s heartbeats reverberated through the still air. Yuri broke the silence, whispering to Ivan.

“What was that?” Marcus asked Yuri.

The two cosmonauts looked over, recognizing the distress all over Marcus’ face.

“Yuri says that we’re probably the first humans to witness this. Half the planet, just black. As if we’re back in the stone ages.”

The astronauts let that sink in for a second.

“We are a part of history right now,” Lucy said, all eyes glued to the planet below. “The first human beings to witness a Carrington-level event from space.”

### **Washington D.C. - 6 hours before the event**

“Carrington-level?” The President was leaning back in his big leather chair, a coffee cup in his hand. He wasn’t exactly rude or dismissive, but Angeline had the impression he would much rather be sipping his brew than listening to her. A measly NOAA scientific advisor didn’t belong in a room with the Secretaries of Defense and Energy, the NASA Administrator, and the 20 other very important-looking people. But, today at least, she was one of the most important people in the world.

“Mr President,” she began, reminding herself that not everyone spent every waking hour studying this stuff, measuring the sun, watching for signs of impending disaster like she did. “Multiple solar flares burst from the sun’s surface in 1859, and it culminated in a massive white light flare - the Carrington Event. That initial flare was then followed by a powerful coronal mass ejection, or CME, a massive release of plasma and electromagnetic fields from the sun’s corona. Just some hours ago, the predictive AI system picked up signs of significant flares very

much resembling those from 1859, heading toward Earth. The AI has determined this to be a Carrington-level event with multiple CMEs.”

The President didn’t seem as unnerved as Angeline thought her statement would make him.

“And, what happened in 1859?” he asked.

“The subsequent geomagnetic storm called the Carrington Superstorm, caused widespread disruption to telegraph systems across the whole of North America and parts of Europe. Telegraph poles exploded and caught fire, and operators were zapped painfully by the surges along the transmission lines. Imagine that, but in a time where all of our infrastructure, our money, our security, and our lives depend on these networks and transmission lines. The damage is going to be widespread and devastating. This is not a matter of if, but when. And we know when. In about 6 hours.”

The President stared at her as she spoke, his mouth dropping a little more with each sentence. He was becoming unnerved after all. Total silence filled the hallowed office. Angeline felt the need to fill the silence, to make sure her warning was crystal clear.

“Everything electrical on Earth facing the sun at the time of the strike will take a hit. And according to the AI, that means us, and the rest of the Western hemisphere. The wave of CMEs will wipe out anything else electrical left standing.”

Declarations of war and peace, orders of execution or stays, decisions of gargantuan proportions had been made right here, in this room, and everyone was expecting another one right now.

“So, what do we have in place for this?” The President asked, sitting forward and putting the coffee down on the desk. He had her attention now, but she hesitated. Her answer would be controversial, given the other people in the room, but now was not the time to bite her tongue.

“Nothing, sir. We have nothing.”

He stared blankly in reply.

“That’s not quite true,” the Energy Secretary added with a throat-clearing cough and held up a document with a blue glossy cover. Angeline recognized it even without seeing the title.

“We have the National Space Weather Strategy and Action Plan.”

Angeline couldn’t help the scoffing noise that erupted from her throat. The President raised an eyebrow at her.

“You don’t agree with this plan, Doctor Frobisher?” he asked.

“The plan is great, I even helped draft it originally.”

“But?”

“But... it has not been implemented, Sir. I believe your administration is working on a plan that is designed to implement the action plan, but only once that plan has been planned out and reviewed and sent to committees for another plan. We have a plan for a plan.”

“Your point Doctor?” the President held up a hand to stop her.

“My point, Sir, is that our nation - our whole planet for that matter - is vastly unprepared for an event that, quite frankly, we’re very lucky to not have experienced earlier.”

The President thought for a few moments, then turned his attention away from Angeline toward every other face in the office. He seemed to expect someone to jump in with a new piece of advice, something actionable he could put into effect.

“Sir,” one of those faces spoke up. “We don’t have much time. You have to address the nation.”

No one said anything, but they didn’t need to. They all thought the same thing.

*It’s too late.*