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THE ANNE SWIFT INVESTIGATES SERIES

## Anne Swift: Molecular Biologist Detective

### The Malicious Meteor Mayhem

By T. Edward Fox

A large meteor has been on approach to the Earth, destined to miss by fewer than 10,000 miles, when it mysteriously mushrooms and breaks into pieces. Several of these plunge through the atmosphere. At least one slams into the ground in rural Pennsylvania.

For the first time in her secret career, Anne Swift must take on a major microbiological issue that the whole world already knows about. Secrecy is out the window. People have been dying, live and in color on the 6 O'clock News.

Anne and her team must get to the site, grab the remnants, and get them to a lab before more people die. And, before a nosy newswoman can reveal their activities to the world.

Is this the time that Anne's secret identity is made public?

This book is anti-dedicated to that generation of newspeople who place their own careers ahead of either the safety or welfare of others. It is **not** your job or duty to make news... you are "reporters." Report what is happening without trying to make news; often out of nothing. While you're at it, learn proper grammar!

## THE ANNE SWIFT INVESTIGATES SERIES

**Anne Swift and the Malicious Meteor Mayhem**

## FOREWORD

When I first heard the news about the meteor heading for Earth, I felt the same level of panic that I reserve for “major pandemics.” In other words, I tend to believe that the nightly news is making a whole lot more of it than is necessary, or warranted.

Then, and in spite of my pessimism, everything got a whole lot more dire. We all knew that the Earth was about to be passed too close for comfort, but when the thing shattered and parts headed right for us, it made the War of the Worlds broadcast look like a sitcom.

As I was assisting our good Mr. Fox in researching a previous story about Anne’s exploits, she let slip about her involvement in this story. I think that I might have had some notion that she had a hand in everything, but the more I heard, the more the hairs on my neck stood up.

And, the more I began to hate and distrust reporters. Knowing what I now know, and seeing how things get presented on the news, I can no longer watch broadcasts without making snide comments and snorts of derision. I’m not alone. They brought it on themselves and deserve the mistrust they get from the public.

*Victor Appleton II*

## CHAPTER 1 /

**IT CAME FROM BEYOND THE ATMOSPHERE**

IT COULD NOT have been a more inopportune time for the phone to ring in the Swift household. The first snow of the season had hit the night before bringing frozen roads, an uncharacteristically empty refrigerator, and a daughter who was capable of turning a common cold into a Victorian melodrama complete with heavy sighs, the backs of hands pressed weakly against foreheads, and declarations of “I may never walk again!” or some other such nonsense.

Anne Swift sat down for the first time in six straight hours. She stared at the cold mug of coffee she had poured several hours earlier just daring it to be cold.

She had arisen just before dawn to the sound of about fifteen snowblowers in the neighborhood, many barking dogs, and the mechanical and hydraulic noises produced by the garbage and recycling trucks that seemed to be able to operate in such conditions but only as long as they could get out into it before six a.m.

Breakfast for her husband, Damon—head of Swift Enterprises and a world-renown scientist and inventor—and their son, Tom—swiftly (pun intended) surpassing his father for notoriety—should have been a simple affair. That is until she discovered that only a single egg remained in the carton, the two heels of a loaf of bread, and that there was no milk.

The three of them made due with toast and various jams and jellies and some beef jerky she found in the

pantry. She knew that they would be able to have a breakfast once they reached work, but feared what might happen if they should become stuck getting there.

With them soon out of the house, she attacked the Sandy problem which included making a hot cereal with raisins and dried cranberries, then standing by the door listening to her daughter list all of the terrible things that were going to befall her if she couldn't get to school and that she felt terrible with a capital T and that what she really, really, really wanted was a hot bath and a cup of tea.

Anne wanted a cup of vodka, but she decided that wasn't going to help matters.

It was shortly after that when the power went off for a half hour, time she decided to spend behind their own snowblower making the driveway and sidewalks safe.

Back inside and with power finally restored she did the housekeeping thinking more than once—and for more than even the fiftieth time in the past few years—how nice it might be to have hardwood floors instead of carpets that required twice-weekly vacuuming.

But now, as she sat at the kitchen table reading the previous day's paper, she was starting to relax. The major new of the week was, of course, the giant meteor that had passed the orbit of Mars a week before and was headed for a near-Earth encounter. While about ninety percent of newscasters tried to build up a really good panic—despite assurances from astronomers and “Government sources”—and therefore better ratings, the few level-headed and more professional of them kept telling people that it would miss Earth by almost half the distance to the moon,

be here and gone in just a single hour, and have less effect than the tidal swings from our solar companion the Moon.

She was reflecting on how Damon and Tom had both assured her that, barring some unforeseeable catastrophe, it would pass in two days and would head straight for the Sun where it would be swallowed without notice. As she sat there a shiver ran down her spine.

Anne was wondering if she were having some sort of premonition, or if the heat just needed to be turned up, when her cell phone rang. She pulled it from her purse and looked at the caller ID.

*Nuts!* she thought as she recognized the private ID. *I don't need this.* Into the phone she said, “Yes, Quimby? What is it this time?”

Quimby Narz was a local FBI agent, although some folks would swear that he was with the CIA and had seen identification to prove it. No matter, he was the agent in charge of the extraordinary scientific lab hidden below a local bank. Like something out of a James Bond thriller, the small Merchants & Co, bank of Shopton, New York, was a front for one of the best-equipped laboratories on the East Coast.

Anne, holder of a Bachelor's in Microbiology and a Doctorate in Molecular Biology, had been secretly recruited when her two children were quite young. Because of her unique combination of skills and an ability to solve the almost unsolvable, she now took on several assignments per year. All must be completed in total secrecy and most were literally matters of life and death.

“And a frosty late morning to you, Anne, and that

includes the weather as well,” Narz replied recognizing the tone of her voice. “What I want is the same old thing: peace in our lifetime, no more famine, and an end to industrial pollution. What I will settle for is getting you down to the game room for a little round of spring cleaning. Or, in this case, late autumn cleaning. Can you be there in an hour, please?” He didn’t wait for an answer. The connection clicked and the call was over.

Anne knew that she was allowed two refusals each year where she could simply inform the agent that she was not able to participate and that an alternate scientist, team of scientists, or even a different facility would have to be used.

She had used them both this year during the summer and now she had no option other than to outright resign or show up and hope that whatever it was could be managed in a few days.

She looked in on Sandy as was happy to see her sound asleep and snoring loudly. *Someday, Bud Barclay is going to get to enjoy that snore of hers*, she thought with a little chuckle.

After showering and dressing, Anne climbed into her car and drove slowly downtown. The sun had come out and most of the icy snow was softening making driving safer. It would probably be slush in another hour. A space was available practically in front of the bank so she parked there. As she approached the meter, the small fob on her key ring sent out a signal and the meter sprang from NO PARKING up to the maximum time of three hours. It would count down to about twenty minutes, she knew, and then would reset itself to the maximum again and again until she was ready to leave.

A nifty trick.

As usual, she signed into the safety deposit box vault, was escorted in by a young woman and soon disappeared through a hidden door in the rear of the vault.

Quimby Narz was waiting in her lab downstairs. Anne wasn’t certain whether to be curious about the lack of any other individual or not; these days she rarely worked projects alone. They exchanged greetings before he told her, “We most likely do not have a problem.” When she scowled at him, brow furloughed, he continued. “However, we might. We do not know. *Yet.*”

“Quimby. I have a point on the end of my favorite pen here in my purse and I will stab it into your neck if you don’t get to your point.”

“The point is, this meteor that is coming toward us broke into about a hundred pieces overnight. They are still packed closely together so the casual amateur astronomer will not see anything until late tomorrow morning, but the guys with the big lenses think some of those pieces may come for a closer look at our fair planet. Hopefully no closer than about ten thousand miles, but a few might even come for a permanent visit.”

“Surely this is something for whatever came out of the old civil defense system. Figure out when and where and then get people into shelters? Unless somebody thinks that we’re are going to get hit so hard that today’s dinosaurs will be extinct shortly?”

“No. Everyone is fairly certain that the largest piece is only about a hundred meters wide. Of course, if *that* hits land it will leave a crater about ten miles wide and a half-mile deep. Depending on where that hit, destruction and

death would most certainly occur. Fortunately, and as near as anyone can tell, that is the piece least likely to come close. No, the size of the ones we might encounter would be the one to thirty meter pieces that could get caught in our gravity.”

Looking him squarely in the eyes, Anne asked, “What will that have to do with us? Me?”

“Sit down, Anne.” She took a seat on one of the stools next to a filing cabinet. “Now, the reason we need to be on standby is that it is believed by a few astronomer that this was the companion meteor to one that hit the Earth in eighteen ninety-seven. It struck Africa in the eastern edge of what use to be Abyssinia, what is now part of Ethiopia. That area was lush and green and purported to be one possible location for the fabled Garden of Eden.”

Anne looked at him with great skepticism.

“Shortly after it hit, almost everyone in the area either became ill or died. Crops withered, trees perished and the area is now classified as a desert.”

Following what passed for logic in Quimby’s world, Anne considered what he was telling her. “Do you mean that *if* this is that companion meteor, and *if* it has the same makeup as the other, and *if* the other one really did cause the garden to become a wasteland, that there is a possibility that wherever a piece of the latest one hits could suffer the same fate?”

He nodded. “And that is why I want us to be ready in case any of this comes to pass.”

\* \* \* \* \*

The news was abuzz with stories the next morning

about how the one big meteor was now a hundred meteors. Many reporters seemed to neglect telling people that this wasn’t some magical meteor cloning thing gone wrong, that one large had not suddenly become a hundred, equally large meteors. The few that got it right were uncertain how to interpret it for their viewers or readers and so they too began acting like Chicken Little talking about the forthcoming falling sky.

Anne and Damon sat at the kitchen table reading the paper. “What should we be thinking about this, dear?” she asked.

He took a breath and set down the sports section. “We’ve been doing a lot of number crunching, Anne. We have to because if there is anything that is going to come too close we have to think about evacuating the outpost.” He referred to the a large wheel-like space station 22,300 miles up and over the equator. Placed there just a year earlier, it was home to a team of thirty-eight men and one woman. “Everything we can compute says that only two or three pieces have drifted far enough away from the main cluster to stand a chance of being heavily influenced by our gravity pull.”

“How large are those pieces,” she asked. He could hear the nervousness in her voice so he reached out and placed his hand on her arm.

“As far as I know, the smallest is about the size of a small automobile and the largest the size of this house. Before you ask, none of them is on a direct course to hit the Earth. If anything they will either skim the atmosphere and bounce back out into space, like a skipping rock out on the lake, or they might slow down enough to fall in a wide arc. In any case, we believe that

only the largest piece would not burn up on entry, and that one should end up only about the size of your new washing machine.” he smiled at her and she returned it.

Her only other questions was, “When?”

“We’ll all know by seven tomorrow morning. Twenty-three hours and counting.”

\* \* \* \* \*

Like many hundreds of millions of people around the world, Anne sat transfixed in front of the TV the following morning. Tom and Damon had spent the night at Enterprises dealing with a partial evacuation of the outpost in space—many family men were embarrassed to ask but felt it best to be with their families—along with a deluge of calls coming in from around the world. Some asked questions while others demanded to know what the Swifts were going to do about the situation. So, Anne was alone downstairs while Sandy lounged upstairs.

The plastic- and makeup-enhanced artificial woman from WOSG in neighboring Oswego was trying to convey the sense of horror everyone should be feeling as the time for a possible collision approached. She was perplexed when her own weatherman asked her to explain what, exactly, was going to happen. She spent ten full seconds blinking like a rabbit caught in headlights before simply glossing over the question and announcing that they would be continuing their non-stop coverage right after a commercial break.

Anne reached out and picked up her phone dialing the number for Agent Narz’s private line. Three clicks told her that she should leave a message.

“Quimby. Anne. I’m heading in right now. I know that the bank is closed, but I need access. Make sure of it!” She pressed the disconnect button, got up and grabbed her purse. She had been fully dressed before five a.m.

When she parked in front of the bank and got out, the door opened slightly. She walked up the two steps and looked around. Nobody else was on the street so she entered. Narz was waiting for her. As he locked the door she headed for the safety deposit vault. Three minutes later they were both downstairs.

It was six fifty-one when the television screen came on in her lab. The Oswego station was squeezing in another ad break in their ‘non-stop coverage.’

**CHAPTER 2 /****UNLEASHING DISASTER**

THE FIRST of three visible chunks of the meteor came down through the atmosphere at nine-seventeen. As nearly as anyone could tell, it burned up before striking the ground. A good thing as it would have impacted a few hundred miles off the coast of Massachusetts and could have caused a small tsunami.

One minutes, eleven seconds later the largest of the three began its fiery streaking across the sky. It did not fully burn up and hit in a heavily-forested area of north central Pennsylvania. The resulting shockwave was felt as far away as Chicago.

A heavy snow storm curtailed any fire from spreading more than a few thousand feet from the impact site.

Piece number three came down just nine seconds after the second one, also hitting somewhere—a tremor testified to the impact—but it was not immediately known where it might have hit.

Fifteen minutes went by with Quimby constantly on his cell phone or on one of the three lines in the lab. Finally he hung up from his latest call and turned to face Anne.

“I’ve just been told that we are through the meteor strikes. Everything else passed and is heading for solar burn-up.”

“What about the two pieces that hit?” Anne asked.

“The big one is evidently very visible from the air. The impact flattened trees for about four hundred feet all around it. I’ve had the National Guard and the Air Force notified to be containing that area from the air and on the ground. Nobody is going to get within thirty miles of that piece.”

Anne considered something, then asked, “What about anyone who might be inside that area already?”

Narz looked at her. “Well, yes... it is possible; that area is a large national forest. It is currently under eleven inches of unseasonably-early snow and about thirty degrees. Not particularly good camping weather, but I’ll admit there might be people in there. All the more reason for us to get out there to pick up what’s left.”

“And, when you say, ‘we,’ who do you exactly mean, Quimby?”

“We have the necessary anti-contamination suits and I have ordered a sealed military helicopter to drop a small back hoe digger a few hundred feet away. The team from our lab in Akron is on the way, but I need you to suit up and come along. We’ll have you back by dinner,” he added knowing that Anne needed to maintain her “normal” family life in order to keep her secret life a secret.

They took Narz’s car to the Shopton Regional Airport where they quickly transferred to a small, but very fast, new helicopter Anne had never seen. It featured a main rotor, but also had two turboprops mounted on the sides

of the main body. This, she realized as soon as they took off, provided almost private jet-like acceleration and cruising speed. They arrived at a small, nondescript military airfield somewhere in Pennsylvania just forty minutes later.

A second helo, an older modified 'Huey,' was being scrubbed down a hundred feet away. "Decontamination," Narz explained. "We'll go into that building," he said pointing at the low cement block structure to their left, "and get suited up."

By the time they arrived at the actual impact site it was almost noon. The meteor had not required digging up. It had come crashing down through enough trees to cushion the impact, so it sat about three-quarters buried in a crater that was just fifty feet wide and about ten feet deep. The trees all around the crater were laying down pointing almost exactly away from the impact site.

While Narz checked with the other scientists, Anne climbed down the ladder someone had set in the hole. She held out a portable Geiger counter. Nothing registered except basic background radiation. She next checked the temperature from about five feet away. It was a stifling one hundred twenty, but not dangerous.

She walked all around the meteor noticing what had appeared to be a glowing hot rock was simply an inherent orange color to the exposed minerals, possibly iron rust.

Anne stopped and was staring at one area on the meteor when Narz climbed down and came over to her. "What

are we looking at?"

She pointed, and it became very obvious what they were looking at. On the ground next to the meteor was a hammer and a steel rod along with a lot of particles from the meteor. Above them was something that sent shivers down their spines. A jagged gap in the mostly smooth surface.

Someone had chipped off a piece of the meteor!

\* \* \* \* \*

Anne arrived at the lab the next morning. The largest piece of the meteor from Pennsylvania had been sequestered in a vault in Ohio, but all of the small chipped off pieces and another larger sample now sat inside the sealed chamber at the back of the lab.

A thorough search had been made of the area around the impact crater, but no one was found. Since none of the scientists had chipped into the meteor, it had to be assumed that someone living or visiting the area had. That spelled potential trouble.

A search of the crater had shown at least one set of footprints that had slid down into the hole and slipped and slip trying to get back up. They disappeared into the snow a few hundred feet away. The modified Huey had gone up on a search but had spotted nobody.

A crew had worked overnight to bury the impact crater and to move many of the fallen trees over the area, and even those would be gone within a few days and the area replanted with new trees.



She set everything up so that a battery of experiments, measurements and calculations could be made on the samples, then shoved her hands into the control gloves—the “waldoes”—that precisely mimicked her arm, hand and finger motions inside the chamber. Moments later she had collected a dozen small fragments into various sealable containers and onto several slides. These soon were being transferred to equipment in the lab.

Her first slide was centered under the lens of the super microscope produced by her own husband’s company that used a combination of high-powered optic lenses and a computer enhancement system. It could bring images onto a 42-inch HD monitor that were ten times closer and five times better defined than the best optical microscope available.

What she saw was no surprise.

It was a rock. Certainly, one striated with veins and clumps of various minerals, but little different from many samples she had studied years ago in college. Anne hoped that either the electron microscope or the gas chromatograph, or both, would give her a better peek inside what was now looking like a lump of mineral stone.

One small sample was pulverized and broken down so that it could be fed into the chromatograph for a complete analysis of its component elements.

Another was prepped for the scanning electron microscope. This one would be her first look into the realm of the structure of the meteor.

As she waited for the small sample to be delivered into the vacuum chamber of the scope, she began humming a little tune. It was something she had heard days earlier and had burrowed its way into her mind—an ear worm. She shook her head to try to clear it out, but it kept annoying her.

Fifteen minutes later when the very best views had been captured and stored in the computers, Anne turned the scope off and sat back. She was no closer than she had been before. It stubbornly refused to look like anything other than rock. Smoothed wherever it had been exposed to the ravages of its decent through the atmosphere, but basically rock.

However, once the results came through the chromatograph, she had a renewed interest. Nestled right in between elements such as iron, carbon, phosphorous, copper, chrome, molybdenum, nickel, vanadium, antimony, neodymium, and even a trace of gallium was a gap. And, way down deep in that gap was something the machine could not identify. It wasn’t elemental. It wasn’t mineral. It wasn’t even an odd combination of inorganic materials.

It was definitely organic and it wasn’t something the computer could identify.

It sent a shiver up Anne’s spine, something that rarely happened these days.

It was such a shock that she didn’t hear the phone ringing on her desk, just a few feet away. In fact, it wasn’t

until twenty minutes later when a hand settled on her shoulder that here ears were given a share of her mind and a voice was saying... “...you okay? Anne? Are you okay? Come on, Anne. It’s Quimby. Anne?”

She reached up and grabbed his hand and stood up to face him.

“We have to do two things, Quimby,” she declared looking deep into his eyes. “First, get me Wiley and someone who’s up to date on infectious diseases, and then get out there and recover that second chunk. We’ve got a real problem.”

Narz knew Anne well enough to not ask for proof or even an explanation. He nodded and pulled out his cell phone. Ten minutes later he put it away and nodded to her a second time.

“We’ve had a team scouring the woods around the site since you and I were there. It’s starting to get dark but they are bringing in night vision equipment. If there is anyone there, they’ll find him.”

She looked at her watch. The time had flown by and it was time for her to depart. “I’ll see you tomorrow, Quimby. Or not. Just make sure Wiley can be here plus that other person. Lyda Morrison would be perfect if she’s available. Abbie Parker would be a good second choice. Well, got to run.”

\* \* \* \* \*

Wiley Oswaldt came into the lab whistling something that Anne immediately recognized. It was that blasted ear

worm tune! The one that had finally disappeared the previous afternoon.

“Rats!” she declared out loud as it began going through her mind again.

“Are we experimenting on them?” the older scientist asked, not understanding the reference.

She explained the annoying tune issue to him.

“Oh, dear Annie. I am so sorry. It is a tune my daughter, Penny, was playing in her car yesterday. It’s kind of addictive, isn’t it?” He gave her a little grin that she couldn’t help but return.

“I need to show you something, but first, tell me what Narz already filled you in on.”

Wiley Oswaldt was more than twenty years Anne’s senior with an entire lifetime of experience more than she did, but he recognized one inalienable fact: Anne Swift was the very best scientist he had ever worked with. Period. He deferred to her judgment in this lab and was happy to oblige her requests.

When he finished, Anne sat back in thought. “Well, I can only think of two things he didn’t tell you. First, that we have a second, smaller meteor out there with only a basic idea where it might be. Right now that’s Quimby’s problem. The second one is what I discovered just before I left yesterday. Take a look.”

She pulled up the chromatograph results and gave him a minute to study it.

“Oops!” he said, seeing the gap with the organic compounds. “At least it appears as if we have a place to begin looking.”

Wiley had a hatred of the pre-packaged foods that were available to them so he always brought his own. He left the lab to put his lunch and dinner in the break room refrigerator. Before he could come back, the door opened and an attractive black woman entered.

Seeing the newcomer, Anne walked swiftly over and wrapped her arms around the woman, lifting her off her feet in the process.

Lyda!” she said with obvious joy. “I’m so happy Narz could get you.” The two women were deep in a “so, what’s new with you” discussion when Wiley returned. Introductions were made.

“Annie tells me that you’re Queen of the Hill when it comes to ferreting out infectious diseases,” Wiley told Lyda. “I recall having you in one of my classes, way back in my teaching days. You were a phenom then. And a real distraction to all men and perhaps a few women. You are even more beautiful now so I am hoping that you are at the very least a slightly better scientist.”

“She’s even better than that now, Wiley,” Anne said watching their new arrival blush deeply.

“Ah, and quite modest as well. I think I mistook that for studiousness back in the day.” He winked at Lyda who leaned over and gave him a little peck on the cheek. Now, it was Wiley’s turn to give a little blush. “So, let’s plunge

the knife right in and show you what Annie found.”

The three sat at Anne’s desk looking at both the chromatograph results as well as the most detailed picture she had been able to get from the electron microscope.

Five minutes later, Lyda smiled at them both, rose from her chair and stood over them. “Very nice work my old friend and my old professor. Very nice indeed. Everything so clear and... well, and obvious. What you have there,” she said pointing at the screen, “is *Yersinia Pestis* mixed with a healthy dose of *Bacillus Anthracis*. In other words, you’ve got a nasty little cocktail of the Black Plague and Anthrax!”

She watched them closely as both Anne and Wiley sought to form words. Finally, she broke the silence.

“Now, I am no chemical engineer or even a mineralogist, but I also see that you have a carbon-phosphorous compound in there that is very much like one of the strongest natural weed killers I know of. Do either of you want to tell me what’s going on here?”

Anne patted the chair Lyda had vacated. “Sit down. We’ve got a real problem on our hands.”

She told her friend about the meteor and how it had come down in two known places. When she mentioned the missing chunk and the small piece that someone had broken off, the only comment made was from Wiley “Oh-oh!” But when Anne related Quimby’s story about the African meteor and the devastation it had caused, Lyda

could find no words coming to her lips.

“What do we do?” she eventually whispered.

“The first thing is to contact Quimby and let him know what is out there. The next thing is to come up with the very best solution for helping anyone who is affected. The third thing is what he’ll want first. A way to destroy it.”

Lyda looked confused but asked, "Do you mean a way to control or cure it?"

Anne shook her head. When Lyda turned to face Wiley, he too shook his head.

As Anne went down the hall to call agent Narz and get a cup of coffee, Wiley and Lyda Morrison began tearing apart a sample so that even closer studies could be made. Wiley especially needed to determine if these were mutated strains of plague and anthrax. A lot of what they might do would be based on that information.

For her part, Dr. Morrison began an even more detailed examination of the organic compounds to ensure there were no other nasty surprises in store.

When Anne came back in, Lyda looked up and gave a strained smile. “Looks like all we’re dealing with are the two we know about. Wiley’s trying to determine if they are original strains or something nastier.”

“And,” he said, standing up and rubbing his eyes two minutes later, “we have what I believe to be an almost match for medieval Bubonic Plague plus a recognizable strain of common anthrax. That much I can determine. If

we assume that everything that came down has just these two dreadful roommates, we may have an easy solution.” He looked at Lyda for affirmation.

She nodded. “Right. A good wallop of antibiotics like Ciprofloxacin and maybe even good old Penicillin, I.V. Heck. Might as well throw in Doxycycline while we’re at it. In a case like this it pays to go overboard. That will do for the Anthrax unless it gets ingested. Once it hits the gut, all bets are off. We could see sixty or seventy percent of intestinal anthrax patients die if they don’t get rapid treatment, and still twenty five percent or so even if they get treatment in time.”

“That’s not a very good use of the term, ‘in time’,” Wiley commented. “What about all the variations of the plague?”

“Well, Y-pestis can lead to several variations: Bubonic, Scepticemic and Pneumonic plagues. Without treatment, about seventy percent of people will die in ninety to ninety-six hours. Luckily, strong antibiotics are also called for. Our friends Ciprofloxacin and Doxycycline are pretty effective. We might up the cocktail with Streptomycin or Gentamicin.”

Anne had been note taking. She looked up when Lyda stopped reciting medications. “What’s the prognosis? I mean, assuming we can get the meds into anyone who contacts this stuff.”

Lyda took a deep breath. “Well, if we get all that into someone inside of the first eight hours, there is every

likelihood of a total cure. At about twenty-four hours after exposure, then they have a ninety percent or better chance of survival. During the next day, all our meds cocktail plus oxygen saturation and deep hydration can keep things up in the high eighties.” She stopped and shook her head. “After that, it’s a real crap shoot.”

An hour later they had determined that it was non-transformed Anthrax and Y-pestis plague. Anne and Lyda formulated the drug cocktail and Wiley helped run the numbers to determine dosages based on gender and body weight. Everything was provided to Quimby Narz who forwarded it to the CDC.

“I’m guessing that there is nothing you might do that a hospital can’t do just a swell,” he told her. When she agreed, he went on. “Okay. Then I guess that means Dr, Morrison can go home. Wiley too for that matter.”

“Uh... what about me, Quimby?”

“I can really use you out in the field, Anne. All standard precautions, of course, but I need your brains out there directing things. We still haven’t found the missing piece that was chipped off but we believe we might be getting close to the other chunk that hit the ground. The people out there will need an expert to tell them what to do to secure the area and... um... disinfect it? Is that what they’d do?”

Anne sighed. “In a way. What is going to have to happen is that all animals within a mile or so are going to need to be captured and treated. That’s only if we can get the

missing bits in the next day. After that you may find that areas will need sterilization.”

Narz was quiet for a moment before asking, “And, does that mean as in giving a good steam cleaning, or is it more dire as in cordoning off and burning?”

“I wish it were the former, Quimby, but it probably will need to be the latter.”

**CHAPTER 3 /****CONTAINMENT (OUT IN THE) FIELD**

HARLAN AMES received a call from Quimby Narz ten minutes later. It came in on his cell phone. Like Anne, he recognized the code name of his caller and answered immediately.

“Yes? What can a weary ex-Secret Service man do for you?”

“I need you to figure a way to get Wonder Woman free for a couple days.” He filled Harlan in on the events before asking for advice. “How do we do it so we don’t blow her cover?”

“That’s easy. Send her a good old-fashioned telegram with an immediate invitation to all microbiologists on the Eastern Seaboard to a once in a lifetime chance to study microorganisms from this meteor. Damon will immediately recognize that it could be legitimate. All needs to be hush-hush and will be done in seclusion. Attendees need to be onsite by eight a.m. tomorrow in, well, why not make it Bethesda?”

“And, you really think that will fool Damon Swift?”

“You let me have ten minutes and I’ll email the text to you. Guaranteed to get her out of the house for at least three days. Just make certain she is ready for a little play acting.”

Anne received a call at home that evening from Western

Union. She was washing up the dishes from dinner so she put the phone on speaker as she dried a pan. Damon had just come into the room and heard everything.

“That’s a real once-in-a-lifetime thing, Anne,” he told her after the call ended. “I know you put most of that world behind you years ago, but this sounds too good to pass up. As long as it is safe, are you interested?”

It was all Anne could do to keep from jumping into his arms and hugging him. She was both a nervous wreck and so relieved that her husband, the man she kept her secret work from, was encouraging her to take the opportunity.

“You know,” she said after taking a deep breath, “if you and the kids can do without me, I’ve honestly been itching to see if I still have it in me. Do you mind?”

Damon chuckled. “Mind? Heck no. Sandy can play mother while you’re gone. Her cold has subsided into general laziness and it will do her good to get busy. Besides, it will just be two or three days. Right?”

She nodded, then gave him a big hug.

The five a.m. flight from Shopton to Boston took off minus one passenger, although she was listed on the manifest and had even been issued luggage tags for her one large suitcase. Instead, Anne had gone through the gate when the call came for pre-boarders—nobody except her took the opportunity—and then she disappeared out the side door, down to the tarmac, and into a waiting SUV that whisked her over to a waiting Gulfstream jet at the

General Aviation terminal of Shopton Regional Airport.

Half an hour later she was on the ground in Pennsylvania and climbing into a small, totally-sealed helicopter. On the way to the search site she shimmied into a tight-fitting contamination suit and brought the helmet over her head. It seated into a neck ring and a quarter turn had it clicked into place and sealed. The small backpack of the suit would provide air conditioning and air purifying for the next twelve hours.

She could see the hurrying figure of someone in a similar containment suit as they touched down. Once she was standing on the ground she realized that the other suit contained the concerned face of Quimby Narz.

"You don't look happy," she yelled to him as they stepped quickly from under the noise and wind of the rotors.

He shook his head and motioned to their left. Fifty feet away they stopped and Narz faced her. "We've lost containment, Anne. And, in the two worst possible ways. First, the bodies of four campers were discovered just before dawn this morning, about five miles from here."

Anne was shocked. "But, I thought—" She stopped, seeing the look in his eyes. "Quimby. It shouldn't be killing this quickly."

"Wait. It gets worse. Evidently before they died, one of them placed a call to WNSY, a local network affiliate where he worked. He left a message for the News Director, and she contacted their sister station in Oswego.

Their reporter flew into the area this morning before we could stop her."

"Oh, my!"

"Oh, my is right. She did a remote broadcast standing right next to the bodies. We got there as she was flying back out. I'm afraid that once she looked down and saw us in these suits, we gave her the rest of a two plus two equation. She did another live broadcast right from her news helo. We couldn't stop her." *Not without shooting her out of the sky*, he thought to himself, wondering if it might have been a better solution. "Oh, and that news report? It's gone nationwide. To top my bad day off, by now hundreds of millions of people have seen the footage of the bodies."

Narz looked drawn and pale. He slowly shook his head and walked away. Anne followed him to an inflatable plastic tent. Inside, the tightly wrapped bodies of four adults lay to one side of the cramped space. Somebody must have pulled out their IDs as each body bag had a name written on it in red marker.

"They couldn't have known that the meteor chunk they found would be so deadly and so quickly," Anne said sadly. "Where is it?"

"And, the news gets worse. They didn't have it. The only thing we have to go on," he told her as she reacted to the news of the missing meteor fragment, "is that there were five sleeping bags in their tent. And, tire tracks belonging to what our folks say is a GM Cargovan. I've got an APB

out for any of those in a three hundred mile radius. I hate to take you back out of the field and shove you into the lab, especially since you'll need to sleep there to keep your cover story intact, but we can use you doing autopsies on these four."

Anne nodded, sadly. "I need to find out what killed them this fast. By now, these four should just be breaking out in buboes and fighting a nasty cough."

\* \* \* \* \*

Late that afternoon Anne arrived at the 'bank' in a nondescript car. With nobody visible up and down the street, she slipped out and into the front door of the building. The over-large parka she was wearing obscured her lower face and the tinted glasses she wore made her practically unrecognizable.

Anne hated disguises.

So much so that she shed them as soon as she stepped through the hidden door in the back of the safe deposit vault and dropped them on the floor. "Someone else's problem, I think," she said to nobody.

She opened the door of her lab and was both surprised—and not really—to see Wiley and Lyda sitting at his work station.

"Ah, Annie. The Three Musketeers, together again I see," Wiley said with only a small level of joviality.

Lyda nodded toward Anne. "Guess you're going to be stuck with me for a bit longer," she said.

Anne told them of the four known deaths. "I have no belief other than the fifth person in that camp will also be found dead. Quimby is working with the CDC on how to handle that. Nobody wants the public to be panicked, but people have to know to stay clear."

Lyda added, "Or, to get our drug cocktail ASAP."

They all stood there in silence for a minute. Their thoughts were interrupted by the noise of the arrival of the first body in the isolation chamber at the back of the lab.

With Anne wielding the waldoes, samples of tissues and fluids were taken from the body of a forty-something woman with green hair and a dark blue smudge on one side of her neck. This shocked all three until they realized that the hair color was just that—hair coloring—and the smudge was some sort of inexpert tattoo.

Bodies two and three, another woman and a man in their late thirties or early forties, were delivered to the isolation chamber. As before, samples were taken from each and transferred via the sterile tubes and pathways that criss-crossed under and over the lab.

The second body hadn't been immediately recognizable as either male or female until the clothing was removed. It turned out to be a female apparently suffering from alopecia, the disease that meant no or little hair growth on the sufferer's body.

Being a little outside her area of best use, Anne decided to call Quimby to give him a status update.



"Oh, I am glad you called, Anne. I was about to pull the phone out and dial you. We found man number five. Some sort of hippie guru man who had the group on a retreat in the wilderness. He stumbled into a hospital in Altoona an hour ago. An older doctor recognized some of the symptoms and called the CDC. They gave him your drug cocktail recipe and have isolated him."

Anne hated to think what the answer was going to be, but she asked, "How bad is he and what did they give him for chances?"

Narz hesitated, but from sounds coming through it seemed he was looking through some papers. "The doctors there say stage three of four; I guess four is death. Anyway," he said before Anne could concur, "he is still alive, still not comatose and evidently angry as hell. He's been demanding to talk with that female reporter I told you about. Sabrina something or other. Weebermeyer or Weaver-mayer. We're still trying to track her down."

Anne told him about now having three of the four bodies and asked about the fourth one.

"She's coming to you once we get a court order. She was carrying some documentation in her passport declaring that when she dies her body be sent to Israel without delay. The State Department is working with the Attorney General's office to see if we can ignore that. Given the circumstances... well, I'll keep you informed."

Did your people recover the chunk this hippie stole?" Anne asked.

"No, they did not. All they found were some shreds of butcher's paper, some tape and scissors in his front room. The thing we are now very afraid of is that he sent this to someone, unknown to all but him. We've got to get the chance to talk to him before he succumbs, if he is going to do that. And, if he did ship the fragment off to somebody, and that person is stupid enough or curious enough to open the box, then this *thing* has officially gotten out of control."

An hour later Wiley told Anne and Lyda that he needed to show them something.

"I have been studying the blood and tissue samples for signs of anything that would have caused them to succumb so quickly," he told them. "Take a look." He pointed at the screen of his computer. Tapping the space bar on his keyboard he scrolled through a dozen images. At the end, he stood back up. "So?"

Anne wasn't totally certain but Lyda was. "HIV," she said. "They all had the HIV virus and were entering full-blown AIDS stage. That means they have damaged immune systems. That has to be why they died so fast. And the poor girl with alopecia, why she had a second autoimmune disorder to begin with. Do we know if she died first?"

Anne nodded. "I did all of the body temperature measurements and it appears that she either predeceased the other two by several hours, or they tossed the body out into the snow once she did. But, Quimby said they were all found together in the tent, so my guess is that she

did, indeed, die first.”

They were silent in their own thoughts for a full minute before Anne asked, “So, what about the plague and the anthrax?”

Wiley spoke up. “All three showed rapid onset of the anthrax and all the signs of terminal stages of bubonic plague, but none of them have a single bubo. My guess is that the disease progressed so rapidly in them that it bypassed that stage entirely!”

Anne picked up the phone, first looking at her two companions. They both nodded, so she dialed Agent Narz. “Quimby. We have the answers, at least for these three. But before I tell you, do you happen to know if the missing fourth woman is suffering from AIDS or at least is a known HIV carrier?”

“Anne. I don’t even know her real name. We have an Americanized name but her ID also has her Hebrew name, but it’s in Hebrew. I’m trying to find someone who can read it within our organization. I really, really don’t want to take this outside.”

“Oh. Hang on a sec,” Anne placed her hand over the mouthpiece and related the information to Wiley and Lyda.

“Annie. Shame on you for not knowing. I speak and read Hebrew like nobody’s business. My grandfather was a Jew!” Wiley told her with a big smile.

“Quimby? Get an image of that name or even the entire passport to Wiley. He can read it!”

The image came through attached to an email a minute later. Wiley looked at Anne’s screen and told her, “The woman’s name is Ariella Yocheved. Roughly that means mother of Moses, the lioness.” He wrote it down for her along with the translation of her address. Anne emailed it back to Quimby.

Anne and Lyda finished the autopsies on the three bodies they had in the isolation chamber, closed them up and then had them resealed in clean body bags. These were removed from the chamber and it went through a sterilization cycle.

Quimby called just before four in the afternoon. “Anne. We need you back out here in the field. I hate to keep yanking you around, but we have an issue that has come up at the second site. Get a good night’s sleep because I’ll be calling at three to wake you up. You will need to be ready at three-thirty for pickup to get to the airport. Okay?”

Anne snorted. “When would my saying that it isn’t okay make any difference?” she asked.

Wiley went home for the evening while Lyda said, “I’m not heading back to D.C. for the night. Did I see some bunk beds in the room off of the coffee room?”

She and Anne made dinner from the stores of frozen foods in the freezer, wished that they had a bottle of wine—something that Quimby once told Anne was against regulations—and made an early night of it.

Anne was up before her cell phone rang and had already

showered and dressed. Lyda was still sleeping soundly when she closed the door and walked down the hall to the lab.

“Morning, Quimby. I’m ready. You can have them pick me up any time,” she told the FBI man.

“Van’s already waiting at the back entrance,” he responded. “Any time you get up there, the driver will whisk you off.”

Three minutes later Anne stepped out into the rear parking area for the bank and closed the practically-hidden door behind her. Climbing into the white minivan, she said, “Why, Quimby. I didn’t know you would be my escort!”

He gave her a rueful smile. “Where you go I must go,” he told her as the van pulled out onto the side street and drove away.

The flight was in the same turboprop-propelled helicopter Anne had flown in two days before. This time it headed north and slightly east, and they soon crossed the border into Maine. A short time later the helo descended to a logging road where they climbed out and into a waiting van. Five minutes after that they stood in front of a camouflaged tent in a heavily wooded area. There were hardly any sounds around them.

Quimby held his right arm out showing Anne the way they should walk; it was away from the tent. Fifty feet farther out they stopped and Quimby leaned his Plexiglass helmet against Anne’s. “Listen, Anne. I didn’t

say anything on the trip here, but we are facing a pretty grave situation. In that tent we have two people. One is a helicopter pilot and the other is the same newswoman who did that blasted broadcast from up over the first impact site.”

“Why are they in there?” Anne asked, surprised at the news.

“Why do you think? Nosey girl reporter thinks she is going to get the next Pulitzer prize by exposing some dastardly government plot. At least, that’s what she has been prattling on about. We forced their helo to land late yesterday afternoon but not before they tried to do another broadcast. We are on to that game so we have a jammer in the vicinity. As nearly as we can tell, they didn’t get a word out. Now, they are... detained in that tent over there, mad as wet hens and she’s screaming alternately for camera time and for the ACLU. I just want you to know what you are going to face in there.”

Now, Anne was very confused. “But, Quimby, why me? Why out here?”

“You, because I can’t begin to describe this plague stuff to them like you can—including, I hope, grisly details about all of the things that can lead up to death—plus you are going to need to work with them anyway. They’ll be at your lab in under two hours!”

Anne’s shoulders drooped. She hated interacting with people who weren’t directly patients or subjects. She also doubly hated it when Quimby told her that on entering

the tent, she would need to quickly open her helmet and don a wig and a pair of sunglasses so the reported could not recognize her. Another hated disguise.

The tent had been built in three chambers: an airlock taking up one corner and large enough for just two people; a chamber where she donned her disguise and that held two armed guards; and the larger, isolation, area at the back.

As she entered the isolation room where the two were being detained, she was immediately assailed with a volley of abusive words. She stood there, silently, and listened to the woman who seemed to have only about five things to say, and she said them at least three times before winding down. The man, presumably the pilot, sat with his head slumped into his hands and said nothing.

When it seemed that the reporter had run out of abuses, Anne took a step forward. “Hello. My name is Barbara Boone,” she said giving her FBI cover name, “and I am a doctor specializing in microbiological issues. While I can understand how you must feel right now, I need to tell you several things before you go hurling swear words and accusations of illegitimacy at me again.”

She looked the two over. The man remained seated and the woman now crossed her arms so violently over her chest that she actually winced in pain.

“Fine. Now you two have flown into an area—two areas actually—where parts of a meteor have fallen. These areas have been designated federal no-fly zones and were so

before you entered them. The meteor contains several deadly things and people have already died from exposure to them. You have also been exposed—”

“Right! Because of you capturing us and imprisoning us in some sort of Government cover-up for germ warfare!” the woman screamed. She renewed her swearing at Anne.

Anne just stood there until the woman became quiet again. “Okay. Let’s start all over. I am Barbara Boone. And, you are...?”

The dark-haired twenty-something woman stared wide-eyed at her and sputtered, “What! What the hell do you mean by who am I? Everyone knows who I am!” she declared looking to her companion for support. He gave a weary shrug. “I am, for your information, Sabine Weaver-Meyers, and I am on television every blessed day of the week. I am the chief reporter and political muckraker for WOSG television in Oswego!” She nodded emphatically as if that explained everything.

Anne shook her head. “I’ve never seen or heard of you. I don’t watch small-town news. What sort of flower arranging and crafts segments do you really do?” She knew this had hit home when the pilot let out a snort and a chuckle, and the woman sat down in a huff.

The pilot looked up at Anne, taking the measure of her. Finally, he stood up and reached out a hand. “William Smalley, ma’am. Folks call me Bucky. Sabine is the one and only field reporter for WOSG and is on some hunt for the ‘big story,’ or something like that. If you don’t mind

me saying so, it sorta appears that she hit this one on the head, don't ya think?"

Anne had taken the offered hand and shaken it. Now, she stood facing Bucky. "William, or can I call you Will? I'm afraid that when I hear the word 'bucky' I think of those little buckyballs that are based on the designs of R. Buckminster Fuller."

He nodded. "I know," he replied. "Will is fine. I only got the name because my uncle is Richard Smalley, one of the guys who invented those fullerene balls." He smiled at her. "Degree in applied physics before I became a helo pilot. More money." Now, he winked at her.

"Shut up, you two!" ordered Sabrina. "It's like a some sort of mutual admiration society in here and it's making me sick!"

Anne turned to face the woman. "I am afraid it isn't the only thing that is making you sick. So sick, in fact, that unless we get you to medical attention soon, you could both die!"

## CHAPTER 4 /

### GETTING RID OF THE EVIDENCE

MOMENTS later, they had been provided contamination suits and were being bundled into the van. Sabrina attempted to make a run for it but a swift and careful planting of a foot by Quimby sent her face-first to the ground.

Will spent the entire time on the van drive talking to Anne about his earlier training and about having a famous man for a relative.

*If only he knew how famous two of my relatives are,* she thought while she smiled at him.

Sabrina spent the short ride in silence and in attempts to wipe the mud from her suit and helmet. It wasn't until they reached the helicopter that she showed any interest. As another man hosed the mud off of her suit, she declared, "So, now I suppose you'll fly us out over the ocean and dump our bodies!" she said accusingly.

Everyone ignored her, especially Will whose attention was wholly take by the futuristic 'coper. In fact, he spent the entire flight talking to the pilot about it while the others said nothing.

As a precaution—and a little like a bad movie, Anne thought—the two detainees had their helmets removed halfway back to Shopton and blindfolds placed over their eyes.

"Sorry about this," Anne told them after looking toward Quimby for some sort of support. "Standard precautions I suppose."

By seven-fifteen, Anne was in the lab still wearing the sunglasses and wig, and the two newspeople had been placed in separate isolation rooms next door. Lyda brought Anne a breakfast burrito and a cup of coffee. After tasting the burrito, she set the plate to one side. Then after tasting the coffee, she explained to Lyda the technique of double brewing coffee that she had learned months earlier from an English doctor.

Together, they went to the break room and re-brewed the current pot of coffee using fresh grounds.

“It takes a little getting used to,” Anne explained, “but it is surprisingly good at keeping you alert without any acid side effects.” She also took out a frozen cheesesteak sandwich and microwaved it.

While she was eating, she made a decision. Removing her glasses and wig, she entered the safe area of the isolation rooms. Will was eating a breakfast burrito with a little more gusto than Anne found realistic, while Sabrina was laying on her stomach in the pajamas provided, a really good pout formed solidly on her face.

“Hello, Will. Hello, Sabrina,” Anne greeted them.

“Where’s the old bag that brought us in here against our will AND AGAINST THE LAW?” Sabrina started quietly and escalated into a shriek. “You stay away from me! Just wait until I tell the world all about your little campaign of murder!”

Will looked at Anne with his head tilted to one side and then nodded and grinned. Since a solid wall separated him from his reporter, he placed a finger on his lips and nodded once again.

“She is not here. I am. Now, we are going to take a few

blood samples from you and probably give you some medicines to keep you from getting ill. And, young lady, before you go screaming that you get one phone call or want a lawyer, I have to tell you that you are being quarantined because of the dangers of the bubonic plague and a strain of anthrax that the meteor contained. You aren’t under arrest, yet, but your little excursions into those cordoned off areas will get you not only arrested but tossed into jail if you don’t keep quiet and cooperate a little! Anyone within about a half mile of those two locations—that definitely includes the two of you—will have been exposed.”

“You’re not getting my blood, you murdering vampire,” stated Sabrina and shoved her arms behind her as if to show that nobody could get to them.

“Cooperate... or don’t,” was all Anne said.

“Take what you need from me,” Will offered. “Take it twice if it will get that stupid, spoiled kid to shut up!”

“Thank you. But, one blood sample and one mucus sample from each will do. If you begin to break out we might need an additional skin scraping. Just so you know. So, since you are going to be cooperative, can you turn to face the wall to your left?”

He did so and a pair of delicate waldoes extended from a doorway that slid open. One held a syringe and the other an alcohol swab. Will’s samples, blood from his forearm and a mucus swab from his mouth, were taken and sent off to the automated lab in less than a minute. Sabrina had to be sedated using nitrous oxide gas before she would submit.

As Anne was reviewing the results with Lyda, a call

came in from Quimby Narz.

“So, where’s my forth body, Quimby?” Anne asked before he had a chance to say anything.

“Uh, we’ve hit a snag there,” he told her. “The Israeli Consulate has made an official demand that her body be released. Our Government can’t admit what is going on, and they are finding it difficult to keep the Israelis quiet. Is there anything we can do to disinfect the body without it being noticed?”

Anne snorted. “Quimby, only if you could magically bring her back to life for twenty-four hours and pump her full of drugs. Incineration would do it as well, but that might be noticed by someone paying attention. Can’t they tell them that she became infected with the plague without telling them it was from the meteor?”

“From where, then?” he asked.

Anne thought for a moment. “What did she do?”

“Work? No idea. All we could find out is that she works... worked in some sort of consulting capacity for the Consulate and that they are extending posthumous diplomatic immunity to her. You know? Now that I say all that is sure sounds a little fishy.”

“Sounds like another set of terms for an intelligence person, Quimby. A spy! I say tell them that she died from exposure to Bubonic Plague in the performance of her official duties and that it was from being in a place she wasn’t authorized to be. That’s mostly the truth. They might just shut up about it.”

“I’ll try suggesting that to State.”

“Do you have any other news?”

“It isn’t good, Anne. We found the fifth camper. He went home, got onto one of those online auction sites and sold ten pieces of that meteor within three hours. But it get worse.”

“How can that possibly be, Quimby?”

The agent could be heard taking a deep breath. “He shipped them off yesterday but didn’t keep any address info. All payments made via one of those credit card clearing houses and they won’t let go of the info until we can get them a federal warrant. Ditto the auction site. And, by the time that clears through, all ten buyers will probably have opened their little bundles of death!”

\* \* \* \* \*

One hour later both Will and Sabine had been given the drug cocktail that would help them ward off the two deadly infections they both were showing early symptoms of.

“Will I ever dance again, Doc?” he asked with a twinkle in his eye as he rubbed one of the three injection sites.

Laughing, in spite of the seriousness of the situation, Anne told him, “No! And my bet is you couldn’t even before this. Am I right?”

He raised a thumbs-up to her and smiled.

Sabrine wasn’t mollified. In fact, she was absolutely livid when informed that neither of them would be getting out of the facility until the Government gave the all’s clear.

“You and your domestic terrorist organization can’t keep me from reporting what I’ve seen. Top secret labs, hush-hush medical experiments being carried out on

innocent civilians. Germ warfare! That's what you're doing, isn't it? Germ warfare and you're experimenting on me. It's all because you know how much of a danger I am to your little secret world, isn't it? Well? Isn't it!"

"Monica," Will called through the intercom to her. His voice was calm and a little sing-song.

"Shut up! You know I hate that name. It's Sabine Weaver-Meyers!"

"No," he contradicted her. "It is Monica Dawson. That whole hyphenate name is as phony as the first name, and both are just as phony as you. Now, you shut up and listen to this. Doc? Tell me if I'm off the mark."

Anne replied, "I will."

"Good, now, Monica, for starters you were ordered to not go back out in the helo after the station manager caught bloody hell from the Feds over the first flight and broadcasts. If I'd known that before you sweet-talked me into trip number two I probably would have gladly flown you out over the ocean and dumped you myself! Anyway, my guess is that the Doc here is a government scientist and they are trying to contain some deadly outbreak of that plague and anthrax she mentioned, and it came down on those meteors." He was looking right at Anne. She nodded and he continued.

"The doc, here, saved your and my lives by getting us to where she could treat us. You owe your lying life to her and whoever else is working here that we've never seen. Now, here's the deal as I see it. Either you and I clam up on this and be nice citizens, or at least one of us may find her 'do I look fat in these designer jeans' butt in some isolation cell in the middle of can't-get-a-call-out land

and probably forgotten all about."

He was smiling openly and enjoying what he believed the girl's expressions must be showing. Had he been able to see her face at that moment, he would have been happy with the results.

Sabrine/Monica had broken down. All of her bravado was gone as she could be heard as she sobbed into her hands.

Anne wagged a finger at Will but spoke mostly to the girl. "I'm going to call you Monica because now isn't the time for subterfuge or lies or made-up names. So, what your friend has said is essentially true. This is a government facility and you were definitely exposed to a pair of diseases that would have killed you in the next day or two. You know that little cough you've developed today? Well, that is one of the early signs. It will be gone in another five or six hours now that we've medicated you both.

"This isn't any kind of germ warfare, at least nothing developed by man. In fact I am of the increasing opinion that the original meteor that contains these diseases has been by Earth several times. It likely passes near enough every hundred or so years to shed off a few chunks. One chunk destroyed the plant and animal life of Eastern Africa more than a century ago, and if you do the math, it would have been nearby Earth just a few weeks before the outbreak of the Black Death."

She let that sink into the girl's mind. Suddenly, Monica's head snapped up and she stared wide-eyed at Anne.

"Then, this isn't a coverup?"



Anne shook her head. “No, Monica. It is not a coverup. It is an unfortunate, natural phenomena that we are desperately trying to bring under control.” She told them both about the ten parcels and the ten recipients that could infect a hundred people each, who could each infect another hundred and so on until millions were sick or had died within a week.

Now tears were streaming down the girl’s face as she understood the fatal seriousness of the situation.

“What can I do?” she asked in a tiny, little girl’s voice.

“Just remain here until this is over. Then, once they let you out, please keep this lab and what we do to yourselves. I know you are a reporter, Monica, and reporters report, but there are times when the safety and security of this country are more important than you getting the big story. Can you understand that?”

Monica nodded. “Yes, ma’am.”

Anne went back to the lab and told Lyda about the recent development.

“Do you think that little girl is going to keep her mouth shut?” Lyda asked. “I’ve been doing some Internet digging about her and you aren’t going to like some of what I found.”

“Such as?”

“For starters, her name, even the Monica Dawson one, is made up. She changed it to Dawson from Pierce when she turned sixteen because her step-father’s middle name was also Pierce and she hated the man. So much that she ended up in Juvenile Detention for six months after she tried to run him over with the car he bought her for her birthday.”

As she was telling Anne this, she pulled up an article about the girl, complete with a photograph that left no doubt as to who the girl was.

“The big nasty thing is that she is at that Podunk Oswego station because she was caught sleeping with a junior network exec in an attempt to get a better job in New York City.”

“Well, all of that is in Quimby’s hands. I won’t make judgments on her. And, unless it says she has an extensive career as an actress I tend to believe that she finally realizes how serious this all is.”

“I’m just saying...”

And, they left it at that as the phone rang. It was Agent Narz. Anne put him on speaker.

“Go ahead, Quimby. Lyda is listening in.”

“Okay, ladies. Here goes. The Israeli government has suddenly stopped asking for the body of Miss Yocheved. They have requested us to bring in a Rabbi and to have her cremated because of what they term, ‘the unfortunate contamination she suffered in the course of her off-time pursuits.’ How’s that for denial? I was pretty sure that you don’t need the body now so I am going to take care of things at this end. If that’s okay?”

“Fine. Any good news?”

“We just got a Circuit Court judge to issue a blanket warrant for all information regarding those shipments, Credit cards, addresses, et cetera. I’ve got agents closing in on all ten locations. But, we may have an even larger issue. One of the packages evidently broke open inside the shipping company’s jet as it was being transported to their sorting facility. Now we have one contaminated jet,

currently back in the air with a different crew, and a fifty-thousand square foot sorting building with six hundred employees that have been exposed. Oh, plus the delivery woman.”

Anne looked at Lyda, who raised her eyebrows and nodded. “Quimby. I think Lyda may have something for you.”

“Agent Narz. Here’s what you need to do. First get those employees back to that building. Get their families and anyone else they came into close contact with there as well. It’s the weekend so their kids won’t have spread it though their schools. That’s lucky, but check with neighbors’ kids. Get all local medical professionals called in on the Federal Medical Emergency Response Protocol Alpha-One-Alpha, and have vast quantities of that drug cocktail shipped in. Ten million units per fifty pounds body weight and err on the generous side. Get everyone inoculated and make them remain in the facility for at least ten hours. Eighteen would be better. Twenty-four the best. While they are waiting have them scrubbed using anti-bacterial sanitizer and get them into new clothes. Old ones get burned on site! Anything that can’t be burned—watches, jewelry, wallets—expose to ultra-violet light for five minutes.”

“Feeding them is going to be a nightmare...”

“Contact the local sports stadium. Atlanta is a big city. Their vendors can feed sixty thousand people at a time. Use them!”

“What about the plane and the crews? And, the people who got the meteor pieces? And, that damn big building?”

“Have the crew in the air stay with the aircraft once it lands. Medicate them the same as the others. As for the plane and the building, once they are deserted of humans, seal all the doors and any ventilation and flood the areas with a spray-around vapor made from half water, ten percent bleach and forty percent isopropyl alcohol. All surfaces must get wet including the homes or post offices or rent-a-box places the packages passed through.”

“That’s a heck of a lot to do,” Narz said, “but there isn’t any doubt if you two feel that is what we have to do, then we do it!”

\* \* \* \*

In all, it took seventeen days to ensure that nothing and nobody had been missed. Fifty-three people lost their lives and two were reported missing during that time.

On day fifteen, two bedraggled people, one man and a young female, were spotted hiking out of a wilderness area in Western Maine. When a Sheriff’s car picked them up and questioned them, their story turned out to be sensational.

"We were flying my news chopper up here a couple weeks ago," the man told officials. "Someone had supposedly spotted another Sasquatch and it was a slow news day... other than those meteors from a few days earlier. Anyway, I'm pretty sure my tail rotor failed 'cause we went into a spin and then the engine cut off and we auto-rotated down into the trees. Got both of us out and onto the ground before it caught fire."

The young woman who was evidently still in a daze could only add, "We walked for a couple days before this older woman named Barbara found us. She was out

hiking and gave us food and directions to an old hunter's cabin. We finally ate all the canned food and hiked out starting day before yesterday. Got anything to eat?"

By the following afternoon Sheriff's deputies had located both the burned out wreckage of the former news helicopter as well as the cabin the pair had broken into.

No charges were filed and neither of the pair returned to work at the small, upstate New York TV station where they had been employed. Within a week of their 'rescue,' they disappeared.

\* \* \* \* \*

"Hey, Momsie!" Tom Swift called out as he came in through the kitchen door a few days later.

"Hello, Tom. What's going on?" Anne had been preparing a pork roast for that evening's dinner. She wiped her hands and turned to face her son.

"You remember those meteors that hit a few weeks back? Of course you do; you had to go to that microbiologist's retreat to study them. Right?" She nodded, suddenly apprehensive about what he might be ready to tell her. She needn't have worried. "Well, you heard that a few people died? Did your group determine that there was some sort of microbe in the bits that hit the ground?"

"We didn't get the time, and it turned out to be something that the Government never figured out either. They came and took away our samples a day early but we all hung around discussing things. Why?"

"It's all over the news how some fool chipped off a hunk and sold pieces on the Internet, and then died. Wow! Why are people such idiots when it comes to things they

know nothing about?"

"I sometimes wish I had an answer to that. That is really terrible news, but it's over now, isn't it?"

"Well, yeah," he admitted, his former enthusiasm now dampened by the reality of what had happened. But, he soon brightened. "Anyway, it turns out that the authorities were able to gather up all of the bits and pieces and they have asked Enterprises to come build a Tomasite box around it all, and then—this is the fun part—they want me to load that into the *Challenger* and take it into space and give it a good, hard shove toward the sun!"

"Can you do that?" Anne asked, feigning innocence. She had been the one to suggest to Quimby Narz that exactly such an approach be taken.

"You bet! Dad gave me the go-ahead and Hank Sterling is working with the Construction Company to build the six panels and the connectors. We'll have it all packaged and delivered before the middle of next week."

"Dear? If the container is made from Tomasite, will it be destroyed when it hits the sun? After all, it holds up as nuclear reactor shielding?"

Tom grinned at her. "We've thought of that," he assured her. "The connectors will be sealed to the Tomasite using a new silicon adhesive that will be hard as nails here on Earth, but will melt like butter when the box gets to within about five million miles of the sun. It will literally fall apart and everything inside gets burnt."

As Anne looked fondly at her son, he became somber. "I guess we'll never find out what it was than killed all those folks. Too bad we can't keep a small piece of it and give it

to somebody to study. Oh, well. See you at dinner. I'm heading over to see Bash! Bye!"

With that, he was gone, back out the kitchen door.

"Oh, Tommy, my wonderful, clever boy," Anne whispered. "If you only knew. If you only *could* know!"

ANNE SWIFT will be back soon in:

## The Incendiary Insect Infestation

