

FIRESWARM

Phoenix, AZ: The citizens of this city are the first in the country to have their lives changed forever by a force unthought in man's imagination.

CHAPTER ONE: Worldwide Flame

A couple stopped their new Dodge pickup outside the city limits of Phoenix. Georgia was a redhead in a delightfully short dress. She got out of the truck and took a breath of fresh air. "Now what, Martin?"

Martin was tall and also had red hair, only his was natural. "We're out of gas."

She walked out from the road, into the sandy desert. "What do you mean, we're out of ooooooh...."

Georgia had stepped through a layer of sand and almost fell into a cavern of surprising depth. Thinking they had made a new discovery, Martin called the local radio station on his cell phone. Within minutes, reporters and police arrived.

The first reporter was a young woman who wore sunglasses. She spoke into a microphone, facing a TV camera. "This is Becky Thatcher Meyer, reporting live at the scene of a newly discovered crater. Theorists at the University of Phoenix believe that one of the meteors that wiped out the dinosaurs might have caused this crater. Hold on, ladies and gentlemen, I smell something burning." She spoke to the cameraman, "Tom, do you smell that?"

"Sorry. I had chili for lunch and the common side effect for beans is, you know."

"I'm not interested in your flatulence."

An explosion came from deep within the cavern. Fire crept up toward the surface. Police tried to evacuate the area while fire trucks were brought in and aimed their hoses down the opening of the cave. Just like a grease fire, the more they sprayed water, the bigger the fire grew.

Another news channel in a different state carried the story. "Good evening, this is Jim Hawkins reporting from KRON-TV in San Francisco. Experts are baffled by a strange fire that began raging outside Phoenix. It's as if it has a mind of its own. The fire started in a cavern two miles outside of the city limits. As soon as fire trucks sprayed water into it, the fire spread through underground labyrinths into the heart of the city. The fire seems to be traveling at high speeds,

and erupted through the sewer and the water system as well. Water makes it burn hotter, as if it were using the water as fuel. That isn't the worst-case scenario. This fire is spreading throughout the southwest and heading toward Los Angeles."

The fire reached the Hollywood Hills through underground channels of water, when it went out as suddenly as it started. Police closed the Hills to the public as investigators searched for any evidence that the fire might start again. Two officers covered the grounds, not convinced that the fire would reappear. They did not take their assignment seriously and enjoyed their lunch.

"If you ask me," said Toni, the woman officer, "we're wasting our time. I came here to fight bad guys, not perform the duties of a firefighter. Oh great, there's a bug on my shoulder and I'm allergic to bugs. Doug, see if my medicine is still in the evidence bag."

Before Doug could search, he noticed more bugs stream down from higher ground, all bright red. They came out of holes that were one-half inch in diameter.

"What on earth?" he said.

"Help me," shouted Toni, as her sleeve caught fire.

Doug ran to Alice. He saw several officers heading for their cars, screaming. Their clothes were in flames and they ripped off their uniforms and beat their bodies with their hats. Doug tried to go to his car, but all the vehicles were in flames. He stared at the blazing cars and the only words he managed were, "Oh my."

The first car exploded and was quickly echoed by the all others.

Their superiors interviewed the policemen and policewomen who survived the catastrophe. The officers gave the same story: Bugs, small bugs, red ones.

A decision was made to take care of the bugs by having them sprayed with pesticide. Unfortunately, the cars and footsteps set the insects off, and the exterminators were soon the ones being hunted.

Although it seemed like a simple problem of pest control, the government was convinced that the insects had destroyed some towns and cities between Phoenix and Hollywood Hills. Commander Cerberus Skinner, a veteran of Viet Nam, had seen the power of napalm and ordered it to be used on the bugs. He wore a dark blue uniform with many medals to a meeting with the mayor of Hollywood and two insect specialists. The older specialist was named Dr. Iyoki and the younger was Dr. Arnold Simms.

The mayor called the meeting to order. “Gentlemen, I turn to you for help. Hotel reservations and airline flights into our city are being cancelled. Because of this infestation, we cannot expect anyone to come here at this time. Dr. Iyoki, what do you and your people say?”

Dr. Iyoki had a low raspy voice. “According to my associate, Dr. Simms, the bugs will attack anything they hear. You shouldn’t do any ground attacks. The government is correct in saying the bugs are responsible for the attacks on other cities. These insects were thought to be extinct, destroyed by the winter that killed off the dinosaurs after meteor dust blocked the sun. They get their energy from any type of intense heat. The only source of heat in space is the sun and they cleverly burrowed down deep into the Earth, where they found the warmth to keep them alive and colonizing. These creatures have acute hearing. Even the simplest sound wakes them, no matter where they are. The sounds of man and civilization drew them to the surface. They are highly territorial, so the areas they have destroyed are their way of marking their domain. Now that they have demonstrated their viciousness, destroy them. I’d hate to see them attack more cities.”

“We plan an air strike with cluster bombs,” said Commander Skinner. “If that doesn’t work, we’ll send in long range missiles. We will watch this on the monitor.” He pointed to the projection screen behind him. The audience watched as the commander spoke into the microphone. “Begin the attack.”

Ten fighter planes flew above the Hollywood Hills. “Look,” said a man in the audience. “They’re coming out of their holes and setting the brush and trees on fire.”

“Commander,” said Dr. Simms. “Make sure you destroy them all. Even the males can give birth and each insect can produce a hundred offspring a minute.”

“Don’t worry. This plan is foolproof. Wait, look. The bugs are on fire. I don’t understand. They seem to be flying while they are in flames. Doctors, what does this mean?”

“That is their own fire,” said Dr. Simms. “They are getting ready to attack your planes.”

The audience was filled with terror as the planes were swarmed by the flaming insects and exploded. Commander Skinner sweated, swallowed, and then spoke into the microphone. “Send in the missiles.”

In a few seconds, they heard the whistling sound of the missiles about to hit the hillside. Once again the insects ignited themselves and flew toward the missiles. They exploded in midair and the bugs drew strength from the blasts.

CHAPTER TWO: A Plan

The audience was stunned. Each of them asked, “What are we supposed to do?” Commander Skinner tried to keep order.

“Let’s not panic. I have a brilliant plan. These creatures can’t be invincible against pesticide. We’ll shoot pesticide filled rockets out of low flying airplanes.”

Dr. Simms spoke up. “Let’s bring in our newest technology. We’ve just finished construction on a portable electricity dome. This can be placed over the hills and electrocute the insects. We’ll need permission from President Celsius.”

“I can scare that government thug into making a quick decision,” said the bearded man who was the head of the General Spice Laboratories, a primary environmental corporation. “Get me to the airport right away. Who knows? The bugs might start attacking anything that flies.”

While he was on his way to the airport, Commander Skinner wore a sour expression. “I can take care of these insects before that dome gets here.”

The audience stared at the screen and watched airplanes shoot pesticide filled rockets at the hills. Once again, the insects came out of their holes and set themselves on fire, and flew into the path of the planes.

“I was afraid of this,” said Dr. Simms. “They are immune to pesticide.”

“What now?” asked Commander Skinner.

“We’ll have to wait for the President.”

Dr. Simms noticed two of his colleagues, David Caldwell and Susan McNee, in the audience. They walked over to him.

“Looks like we’re in a big pickle this time,” said David. The three of them put their heads together, shutting out the rest of the group.

The telephone rang for the Commander. “Yes, this is Skinner. Yes, I see. Thank you, sir.” He turned to the specialists. “The White House has made a decision for us to use the dome.”

A sigh of relief went out throughout the crowd.

CHAPTER THREE: The Dome

The electricity dome was made of tempered glass, shaped like half an egg and covered a good sized hill when dropped into place. The technicians on the switches waited for the go-ahead from Commander Skinner. Insects came out of their holes to defend themselves. A technician yelled into his walkie-talkie. "They are taking off. Shall we switch on the power?"

Commander Skinner spoke calmly to the frightened technician. "Throw the switch now."

Two hundred thousand volts went into the ground. Most of the bugs were immediately electrocuted. The plan went so well that none of the technicians noticed a small crack in the glass that occurred during the roasting.

"They're breaking out."

An explosion rumbled through the hills and down into residential areas. The dome broke into pieces, no longer able to contain the insects or the high voltage. The technicians fell limp and bleeding from the many cuts caused by the spraying glass. It looked as if the sky was on fire from the angry insects, once again seeking to attack their attackers.

"Commander Skinner," said a voice out of the speaker. "The insects are heading toward Hollywood and will be there within minutes. You are now to take orders from General Muster. Half of the available US Army and Marines are either here or on their way."

"Alert the mayor's office and TV and radio to warn the citizens to stay inside their homes," said Dr. Simms.

"Let's get down there," said David. "Susan has a car."

They reached downtown LA before the insects arrived. They were reported to be moving at a slower pace, giving them some time to warn people in their offices and homes. Susan shouted through a megaphone, "Stay in a secure place, put towels under your doors and lock all windows. They can't hurt you if they can't reach you. Do not try to run."

The three took their own advice and went into an open cafe. The manager, Mr. Acorn, was willing to help anyone in need. "Hide with us in the walk-in freezer. It has a seal on the door."

Soon the insects started to pick their way through the city.

CHAPTER FOUR: Meeting General Muster

General Richard Muster was a modern version of General Custer. He insisted on having lunch with Commander Skinner and Colonel Rochester to talk over the insects, and learn about the type of problem they were up against. He turned to his assistant, Lt. Tiff Anderson, a skinny man with horn-rimmed glasses and a voice like Peter Lorre.

General Muster had set up his command station at the Four Seasons and had an exclusive meeting in the huge dining room. “Tiff, we’re having guests for lunch. We’ll start with a shouting match, followed by ravioli, spaghetti, and Campbell’s chicken noodle soup for the faint-hearted, finished with oysters and lobsters.”

Colonel Rochester was a stunning woman an inch taller than Commander Skinner. He met with her outside the dining area, instructed her on how to approach the General. “He likes to talk about himself a lot, so we need to encourage him to get to a real plan.”

The Commander was right. He began long story about a war experience in Viet Nam, but Skinner and Rochester interrupted him, pleading to reveal his strategy for this war.

“As you two know, the way we intended to win the Viet Nam war was to send in wave after wave of men until the enemy got tired and then finish them off. Wish that had worked.... Even today, the men under my command are willing to throw their lives away to assist the great and honorable General Muster. Isn’t that right, men?” He turned to the hundred men he had invited to observe his meeting with the Commander and Colonel. A wave of boos and shouts of “You stink,” echoed throughout the room.

Tiff tried to have an intelligent conversation with the beautiful Colonel Rochester. “It’s so embarrassing working with that man. He once asked me to shave his armpits while he was in the bathtub.”

“Enough about Muster. Don’t you have anything else to say about yourself?”

“Uh, sure. When we were in the bathtub....”

A messenger interrupted Tiff. “Sir, the swarm is headed to downtown Los Angeles.”

“Send the men in,” said General Muster.

In the streets of Los Angeles, citizens scrambled and ran to find shelter. They screamed while trying to put out the fire on their clothes and skin. Some made it to their cars and accidentally drove into the frantic pedestrians. Nothing could be heard but broken glass, screeching tires, the roar of flames, and screams.

“We’re saved,” someone yelled.

Tanks, aircraft, and ships came from all directions. The sight was like the bombing of London during World War II, and to no effect. Insects were quick to destroy anything that attacked them and planes fell from the sky like geese shot by hunters. Tanks melted as if they were made of plastic. In the middle of the commotion, two soldiers machine-gunned the swarm and hoped they would hit enough to slow them down.

At the Los Angeles International Airport, a man in a trench coat ran with his baggage at full speed toward a group of people. One policeman said, "Everyone keep calm."

"All right, we're calm," said a bystander.

"Attention," said another policeman. "The city is on full alert."

"Full alert?" The crowd entered into a new state of panic.

"Darn it, Mark," said the first policeman. "You did it again."

"Sorry."

CHAPTER FIVE: Enjoying the Good Life

Back at the cafe, Mr. Acorn and some of his employees along with Dr. Simms, David, and Susan, sat in the walk-in refrigerator and did not know what to do.

"There's plenty of beer," said David. "We can drink and let our minds fall apart."

"I'm not sitting in the cold, drinking beer, and making orangutan noises," said Dr. Simms.

Eventually the group ransacked the alcohol.

"You know, David does make good orangutan noises," said Dr. Simms.

Susan stood up. "Do you hear that?"

They walked out of the refrigerator and saw that the insects had broken into the restaurant. The bugs rested on the furniture and windowsills, and covered every inch from the curtains to the floor.

"Don't make any noise," whispered Dr. Simms. "If they hear us, it will be the end."

David sneezed and the insects began to move. Susan grabbed a fire extinguisher and covered the nearest batch with the foam as they ran outside of the restaurant.

"Go to my van," said Mr. Acorn.

They drove toward the hills until they neared a gas station. “They’re on us,” said an employee. “We have to jump for it.”

Everyone made it out of the moving vehicle except the manager. The van hit a gas pump and made a mighty explosion. This drew the insects toward this target. A young waitress called for Mr. Acorn. The group turned away from the sorry sight only to see another even worse. The city of Hollywood was completely destroyed. Down below sirens were sounding and soldiers carried out the dead and wounded. They knew that they needed to find transportation to reconnect with their colleagues.

CHAPTER SIX: On the Road

None of the group paid attention to how long they walked. They ate food found in an abandoned store. It had been nearly a day since they had bathed or slept. They found a hybrid station wagon with enough gas to get them to a filling station. Dr. Simms instructed them to head northeast toward a likely target of the insects. “The bugs are attracted to hot climates. We’ll head to Salt Lake City.”

Dr. Simms looked out the window of the vehicle and recognized the Great Salt Lake. He turned on the radio for news.

“Attention citizens of Salt Lake City. Everyone must evacuate because the fire swarm could be here by tomorrow morning. Although most are still in the Hollywood Hills, they seem to be splitting up and heading toward hot weather populations. People are advised to go the Rocky Mountains. Soldiers will help with the loading of passengers onto Air Force transports for those without vehicles. Schools buses, along with private and commercial planes are still available to shuttle people into the mountain communities. The Red Cross has set up shelters.”

The citizens scattered as if they were ants whose anthill was being torched. A man in a gray suit ran in front of their car.

“They’re coming. We’ve got to get out of here. Take me.”

Another man stood in front of them and pointed his gun at their windshield. “I’m taking this car.” He did.

The group was stranded without a car or food in a city of panicked citizens. The four restaurant employees decided to seek transport to the icy safety of the Rockies, and left Dr. Simms, David, and Susan.

Loudspeakers on passing army trucks broadcasted another news flash. "Half of the insects have just taken off and are flying toward Sacramento. Under the command of General Custer, I mean General Muster, both Salt Lake City and Sacramento are to suffer severe damage by flame throwers. The General believes in fighting fire with fire."

"That monster," said Dr. Simms. "He's only going to make them stronger."

A soldier came up to them. "Aren't you the three scientists who were at the meeting? They've looked everywhere for you."

He directed them to an airplane that took them directly to Sacramento. A new command site was on the top floor of the state capitol building and security was tight.

"Tiff," called General Muster from the bath. "Come shave my back hair. I'm thinking." He arrived late to the meeting but was all shiny.

"Gentlemen, this plan is foolproof."

"Are you insane?" asked David. "Where were you these last two days?"

"I've been pondering this since the first moment I was briefed."

"Sir," said a soldier. "The insects have arrived."

In the heart of Sacramento, men with flamethrowers were ready to attack. A sergeant ordered, "Burn them out. Burn them out."

Another soldier said, "Burn, you little punks. You've ruined your last city."

"I don't think this is working," said the first soldier. "They seem to be getting madder and aren't dying."

"Quiet! I'm going to blow up that building they are infesting."

Soldiers used an ambulance to bring in reinforcements, and the bugs attacked them. The driver tried to swat them out of his eyes and crashed into a nearby building. The ambulance exploded. Three soldiers bearing flamethrowers stood their ground. They were all that was left.

One spoke into a walkie-talkie, "Commander Skinner, we need reinforcements." Interference from panicked radio and television signals stopped the message from getting through. The soldier with the walkie-talkie had his uniform coat catch fire. He quickly removed

the coat and was embarrassed to show that he wore a non-regulation *Jurassic Park* tee shirt under his uniform.

Back at the command post, Commander Skinner listened to radio communications. A voice from the radio said, "Salt Lake City has been nearly destroyed."

Commander Skinner looked out the window at Sacramento burning. "Sacramento and Salt Lake City in flames. Hollywood is already gone and I never had a chance to meet Angelina Jolie. Will history blame the insects or me, Commander Cerebrus Skinner, the first commander in history to get beaten by bugs?"

"If they blame the Army," said General Muster, "they will definitely hold you responsible for the failure. They'll praise General Richard Muster, the first general in history to nearly win against a pack of insects."

"You barely did anything. Commander Skinner has done the work to evacuate people and save lives. All you've done is let a man in glasses paint your fingernails," said Susan.

"No, I did not." The General whispered to Tiff, "Quick, hide the pastels."

"Every minute I live is torture," said Tiff.

"We've found a possible solution," said Susan. "The insects are also attracted to salt and we have to isolate them for time to come up with a better plan."

The phone interrupted her. "Hello, this is Commander Skinner."

"Major Hacker from Salt Lake City calling. Some citizens have refused to leave for the Rocky Mountains and are taking matters into their own hands. They are using weapons of their own making. Molotov cocktails, blowtorches, and fire extinguishers are all being tried. This makes the situation worse and causes more destruction, and injures many of our soldiers. Request for permission to use force against these civilians."

"Permission granted, Major. Do whatever it takes to get them out of the city. It's for their protection."

"Wait a moment, sir. The insects are lifting off the city. They seem to be heading toward the southeast. We just got a computer reading that says they are already traveling at 50 clicks per hour and they're just beginning to move."

CHAPTER SEVEN: A New Plan

At the White House, President Celsius in his striped suit and vest sweated up a storm. He and the Cabinet members watched the insects move across their country on a large screen TV.

“Mr. President, what form of action should we take now?” asked the Secretary of Defense.

“Depends on where they are headed,” said President Celsius.

“We predict they will go to Florida. The cities in most danger are on the route toward Dallas, Texas. They are expected to arrive in a short time. Mr. President, I ask again, what form of action do we take?”

“Shoot them out of the sky while they are flying. If we fail, use every means to contain them in the city of Dallas until we come up with a real plan. How is the battle going with the other bugs in Sacramento?”

“No real progress, except the scientists suspect that our only hope is to use frost and salt against them. It’s a tricky situation. The Mexican and Canadian governments are assisting us. We won’t make the same mistake we did with Hurricane Katrina. We need all the help we can get.”

The Secretary of Defense saluted as he left the room. On the screen, fighter jets neared the swarm at the outskirts of Dallas. They were armed with liquid nitrogen and hoped that the intense cold would subdue them. Tanks entered the city, also bearing liquid nitrogen, to aid the jets.

CHAPTER EIGHT: The Battle of Man and Nature

A woman newscaster spoke into her microphone. “What you see here is another attempt to stop the horrible enemy we are facing. Frost may be the solution. We can only hope. People scramble to get out of the city. Freeways are clogged and people are running. Others are looting downtown Dallas. This country has had many disasters, but nothing like this one. There’s never been such widespread terror since the riots after the radio broadcast of H.G. Wells’ *The War of the Worlds*. I say a prayer that the United States of America will beat them.”

She went to the news van and slowly drove while the cameraman sat on top and aimed his camera at the point where the enemy was entering the city.

“Here they come.”

People trampled others like the horror of Hollywood all over again, only worse.

“Take your positions,” bellowed a tank commander to the platoon surrounding him.

“Avoid the front of the tank as the nitrogen will kill you instantly.”

The sky filled with clouds of insects and the soldiers activated their individual tanks of liquid nitrogen. Tanks shot missiles containing intense cold deep into the center of the swarm. A few lucky hits managed to knock down some of the bugs. The sound of stepping on them was like crushing rock. Sparks went off from the dead bugs.

The group mind of the insects reacted to being attacked.

“Captain, we’ve been hit,” radioed in a fighter pilot. “We’re going down and trying to avoid the tanks.”

The jet crashed into one of the specially equipped tanks and the explosion destroyed Town Hall, along with the people hiding inside the granite walls.

Despite the destruction, progress was being made. A third of the insects were destroyed by the cold, and the others left Dallas. The attempt to contain them was futile.

The Cabinet and President Celsius watched as the fire insects rose high into the sky above Dallas and changed their behavior. They made sounds like the combination of an African hissing cockroach and a toucan. The bugs circled higher and higher without choosing a direction, like they knew that the pilots had no more ammunition. Soon the bugs from Sacramento were headed to rejoin their pack. They aimed southeast as one body.

CHAPTER NINE: A Country Falls

The President ordered Commander Skinner and General Muster along with Tiff and the rest of the scientists, to the White House. They watched the destruction in every state in the southeast. Only conventional weapons were available until more nitrogen can be manufactured.

“The insects that came from Sacramento destroyed every power plant between Dallas and Houston,” said the President. “We have ruled out the use of nuclear weapons since the bugs seem to be like the cockroach, and will survive a nuclear attack. They call a group together by making strange noises and are attracted to heat and energy. That’s why they attack the jets and power plants. We’ve warned other countries to shut down their nuclear plants. The entire country is in

panic. Riots and looting are happening all over. Police have failed to keep order in every major city, even those not attacked by the bugs. It could be the end of civilization.”

“You call us civilized?” blurted Dr. Simms. “Whatever we don’t understand, we destroy. We seek out new power to be the strongest in every way.”

“That’s enough, Dr. Simms,” said Commander Skinner. “Please continue, Mr. President.”

“Bugs are expected in Miami in less than an hour. We tried to tire them out but with all the heat they’ve ingested, they are only getting stronger. Here is another thing I hate to think would happen. If they attack Russia, it would be disastrous because the Premier has informed me that they might use nuclear weapons. This is getting close to being the end of the world. Ladies and gentlemen, what can we do? You are the best brains of our country.”

“These creatures cannot survive without air,” responded Dr. Iyoki. “Even underground they had air vents. In water, they have gills so drowning them isn’t possible. Gassing them might work but we need to contain them in an airtight environment. The insects are quick to defend themselves and could destroy the place we isolate them before they are asphyxiated.”

“I have it,” said David. “What about space? NASA has developed a new type of ship so that a large crew can circle the Earth. It’s big enough to hold the entire swarm if the bugs are compacted, and the ship has enough fuel to circle the Earth twice before re-entry. This is the fastest vehicle NASA has built. Cold slows the bugs down and they are attracted to heat to make them more powerful. We can entice them into the spaceship by creating an intense fire near the mouth of the ship and use a giant vacuum to pull them inside. This ship has automatic pilot, so no one will be hurt.”

“Don’t forget, this ship isn’t ours alone,” said President Celsius. “It also belongs to Japan, China, and Russia. We need their permission as well.”

“I’ll call them immediately,” said the Secretary of State.

“We have to keep the swarm occupied while the ship is getting prepared,” said Susan.

Tiff spoke up. “I used to be a fighter pilot until I was stuck with this lug. I can join in a squad to distract them while you’re getting everything ready.”

He wanted to rejoin the Air Force to impress a nurse. They had been great childhood friends. Also, he would do anything to get away from General Muster, even fly into a bunch of fiery bugs.

“I was also a fighter pilot, until I got booted out for drinking,” said David. “I’m still a good pilot. I’ve got twelve commendations for bravery during Desert Storm.”

“Sir, the swarm is now in Miami,” interrupted the Vice President. “Nitrogen missiles are now ready.”

“Send in the planes,” said the President.

CHAPTER TEN: Miami Smoke

Some people in the country thought the bugs were a big hoax, including the citizens of Miami. A man on the beach smelled smoke and looked up from his Cuba Libre. “Are we having a barbecue?” he asked. “Because I am a hungry man.”

He saw the shadow of a big mass, and turned to face whatever it was. The cars on a nearby street were ablaze. The fire seemed to lift up and buildings fell on the half-crazed citizens trying to escape.

In the newsroom, a television news reporter addressed the camera. “For those of you who have just tuned in, the Miami Fire Department is fighting a flame that seems to have no end. It has destroyed half the northern outskirts and is making its way toward downtown Miami. Citizens are ordered to evacuate in an orderly fashion to awaiting buses. We turn now to our live reporter, Mick McCain. Mick, are you there?”

Mick McCain was a medium sized man with a five o’clock shadow. He stood on top of a building with two cameramen. “I’m here and it appears that the ‘fire-swarm’ is no hoax, it’s a fact. Any skeptics need to start believing if they want to survive. The rampage of these insects is unstoppable. A report has just been handed to me. Dr. Iyoki of the National Institute for Science has discovered that water makes the flames stronger. The flames caused by these creatures burns hotter than molten lava. This is the weapon these creatures have against us.

“But there is good news. Our hope lies in cold. People inside their houses should turn on their air conditioning at full blast. Oh no. They are headed straight at this building. This is Mick McCain, signing off.”

The reporter ran down the stairs from the roof behind the first cameraman. Before the second cameraman was inside, he tripped on a cord and fell on the reporter. Both tumbled down

the stairway through an open door. The insects hit the building like a canon. The building burst into flames and the insects poured into the stairway.

CHAPTER ELEVEN: The Last Hope

At Cape Canaveral, Tiff looked through the window at his jet. He saw his old sweetheart, Carmen, in her nurse's uniform walk through headquarters.

“Carmen, is that you?”

“It's good to see you, Tiff. Where have you been?”

They were locked in deep conversation and Tiff made a sorry attempt to ask her out.

“Would um, you, uh....”

“Tiff, get over here and feed me nachos,” said General Muster.

“But, sir.”

“No buts. I can't get grease on my hands and uniform. The press will be here any minute. Tell me, who was that gorgeous woman?”

“Her name is Carmen. I was just about to ask her out.”

“Do I know this Carmen?”

“Yes, sir. You met her when you were doing a tour of the White House grounds. We were attacked by a band of wild chipmunks and she was the nurse who bandaged your pinkie.”

“You were trying to ask her out? Take it from me, Tiff. Be more like me and you'll get a girl in no time.”

Susan joined the General and Tiff. “The press corps is here. They want the General for a private interview in the bathroom.”

“Goody,” said the General. He gave a firm salute and walked off.

“Don't listen to him, Tiff,” consoled Susan. “Just be yourself. By the way, what girl was General Muster talking about?”

Before Tiff could answer, the loudspeaker bellowed. “All pilots report to your planes immediately.”

Tiff ran to the runway and a miniature diary fell from his pocket. Susan picked it up and read, “Dear Diary, I'm about to meet the girl of my dreams again. I hope that one day we become

close enough to be more than friends.” There was a picture inside of Carmen. Susan smiled and sighed. “Poor Tiff. I hope his fantasy will come true.”

In Miami, things were as bad as they could get. The insects had learned to collectively attack flying objects before they could be a danger to them.

David and Tiff’s planes did fairly well until they ventured too far into the middle of the bugs. David did not know what to do. “Mayday, mayday. I’m almost out of nitrogen. I could use some help here.”

Tiff flew to his location and fired his missiles. “David, get out of here. Don’t worry, I have this section and plenty of missiles.”

David flew out and avoided any other bugs. “Tiff needs support,” he said into his radio.

“We’ve got troubles of our own,” said the radio tower. “Commander Skinner has ordered us to pull out. The spaceship is ready.”

CHAPTER TWELVE: Icarus Falls

Tiff fought like a wounded mad dog. “Now you little guys must perish,” he said. The right wing of his fighter jet was smoking. “This stinks,” he said and his plane started to plummet into the ocean. “My only regret is that I didn’t ask Carmen for a date. You can’t have everything. At least I got away from an overly sized slug of a general. Then again, if I knew I was destined to have a premature demise, I would have eaten more butter.” Tiff’s jet slammed into the ocean.

At Cape Canaveral, Susan came into the meeting room and looked forlorn.

“What’s wrong?” asked Commander Skinner.

“Tiff crashed into the ocean just off the coastline.”

“Is he alive?” said General Muster.

She shook her head.

“Oh, dear. Tiff was the bravest of us all, and the best nacho chip waiter I ever had. Let’s have a moment of silence to honor his spirit.”

A young soldier came into the room. “General, the bugs are heading for us.”

“Darn it, Private. You just ruined a precious moment. Very well, how long will it take for them to be here?”

“Less than an hour and their speed is increasing.”

“This will be Muster’s last stand,” said the General. “Did we receive permission from the other countries, Commander Skinner?”

“I spoke with President Celsius not five minutes ago. All three countries have agreed.”

“Good. Shall I give the order to start the engines?”

“Yes, General. I’ve already ordered ‘Project Bonfire’ to ignite the flames and attract the insects. The heat will rival a volcano.”

David entered the meeting room after being saved by Tiff. “I checked on the vacuums. They are in working order and ready to suck up the bugs.”

Everything had been prepared by the time the insects arrived. Dr. Iyoki waited to lead the countdown. “Attention,” he said through the public address system. “The insects have ingested the flames. Start the vacuums.”

The vacuums sucked up the bugs as if they were dust mites in an old mattress. Doors closed on the spaceship and left behind no living insects. “Preparing Operation Icararus in ten...nine...eight...seven...six...five...four...three...two...one. Lift off.”

The ship launched into the first layers of atmosphere without a glitch.

“General, are the ten long-range missiles in place?” asked Commander Skinner.

“Yes, sir.”

“We only get one chance at this. The ship must be shot down at its apogee to release them into space.”

Dr. Iyoki counted down. “The ship will near its apogee in twelve...eleven...ten...nine...eight...seven...six...”

“Stop,” said Susan. “The insects are sending out a signal that’s jamming our radios. We can’t pinpoint the spaceship’s location. We can’t even direct those in charge of the missiles.”

“Tell the missile men to fire a half a second apart on our estimated graph of ascent and let’s hope they get it right,” said Dr. Simms.

David dashed outside the facilities toward the missile men. “Shoot down the spaceship. Orders are to space the missiles by half a second.”

Wasting no time, one of the missile men called out, “Fire, fire, fire,” until all the missiles had been spent.

In Washington, President Celsius sweated more and prayed that the missiles would destroy the unholy enemy. The President and his Cabinet were silent as they watched the

spaceship from lift-off through entering into its orbit. The calm voice of the Secretary of Defense told him, “The impact should be in less a minute.” The pause seemed much longer.

“Counting down to five seconds. Five...four...three...two...one...zero.”

They watched in hope as the first missile missed. “Darn,” said the President. The second was also too short, and so were the third, fourth, fifth, six, seventh, eighth, and ninth. Soon the President was not the only one drenched in sweat. Gulps and gasps filled the room. Someone whined for his mommy.

“Quiet, you thumb-sucker,” growled the Vice President. “If we’re going to die, we’d best die with dignity.”

“Here it comes.”

More gasped as the last missile smashed the spaceship and pushed it further into airless space. For the first time, the audience saw the insects float without their flames.

“We won,” sighed the President.

The radio broadcast a news bulletin. “Attention, people of the United States. Operation Icarus has flown into outer space with the insects encapsulated inside. Within two hours, our own missiles destroyed the ship along with the insects, the greatest enemy known to mankind. This victory could not have been accomplished without the help of the Canadian and Mexican governments, and the permission of Japan, Russia, and China to use Icarus. Special thanks to Tiff Anderson, who kept the swarm distracted and saved David Caldwell, the scientist who devised the plan. Unfortunately, Lt. Anderson died in action. We acknowledge Susan McNee, Dr. Arnold Simms, Dr. Mark Iyoki, and Commander Cerberus Skinner, and General Richard Muster. Without their help our country would have been completely destroyed. Let us have the strength to rebuild our magnificent cities and get our lives back together.”

As they turned from the dais, an excited soldier came up to Commander Skinner and said, “Sir, one of our ships found a survivor in the ocean. He’s identified himself as Lt. Tiff Anderson. And he has a message for a nurse Carmen, asking if she’ll go out with him as soon as he is dry. And another for General Muster, that his nacho serving days are over.”

EPILOGUE: Nature has many ways of reminding us of how small we really are, that she is not to be toyed with. Yet we are insisently destroying Earth at our downfall. If this story doesn’t encourage you to stop mucking up the Earth, I give up. Or I’ll make up another one.