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THE ANNE SWIFT INVESTIGATES SERIES

Anne Swift: Molecular Biologist Detective

The Scary Scroungy Scrofula

By T. Edward Fox

Anne Swift is presented with a problem. A strange homeless man has come to Shopton, apparently healthy, but everyone he comes into contact with begins to suffer from horrible respiratory problems.

A local lab has ruled out tuberculosis and other medical problems.

When the man is taken into custody, even his jailers begin to get sick. Nobody wants to let him go and infect the population at large, but they also don't want to endanger anyone working in or around the jail.

Is Anne's experience and knowledge enough to solve this mystery, and will she succumb to the infection herself when she comes into contact with the man?

This book is dedicated to anyone who works in health care. You put yourself in harm's way on a daily basis. Most of the time you are able to keep yourselves and your families safe. Sometimes, you are not successful. But, you keep on going back to aid those who need you. Bravo to you, I say!

THE ANNE SWIFT INVESTIGATES SERIES

Anne Swift and the Scary Scroungy Scrofula

FOREWORD

Anne Swift had been leading her double life for more than twenty years. I've known her for about five years longer than that and even I can hardly believe all that she accomplishes as part of her secret double life.

Goodness, Anne. You are as close as I have come to knowing a 'super girl.'

Now that I am seeing her declassified exploits on the printed page, I have an ever-growing admiration for her. Ditto the man who is chronicling what she has done. And these books are just the more recent stuff.

I can imagine what things must have been like for her in the early years, before all of the electronic gadgets and computers and such.

This adventure reminds me of a science fiction story published several decades ago about a mutating virus from outer space. Definitely not this story, but the same sense of everything being on the verge of disaster. Luckily, Anne comes through.

Victor Appleton II

CHAPTER 1 /

MIND THE SPUTUM, PLEASE

IT WAS a dreary Monday. Anne Swift had completed her morning cleanup and was sitting in her kitchen in Shopton, New York, having a cup of coffee.

She had eased out of bed three hours earlier and headed for the kitchen in the Swift home where she took care of her famous husband, Damon Swift, and their two children—Tom and Sandy.

As it was with most week days—and, she thought ruefully, far too many weekend days as well—the men in her life ate without really paying attention to their food and had raced out the door, heading for Swift Enterprises, a four-square-mile research and development facility owned by the family.

Sandy had arranged to meet with some friends for a drive over to the New Jersey coast and a day of swimming and beach barbecue. She was on her own.

Once again.

And getting a little bored.

The life she had adopted almost twenty years earlier was a far cry from her university days. Not only had Anne met Damon and fallen in love, she had achieved academic success with a BS in Biology and a Doctorate in Molecular Biology. Once married she seemed to have put all that behind her.

Seemed.

In reality, Anne was one of the top molecular biologists in the country. Her combination of the subject combined with an almost unreal sense of intuition had attracted individuals within the FBI. Years earlier they had approached her with a proposi-

tion: Keep your home life when the family is around but work for the FBI whenever your skills are needed.

It had required very little to convince her. The first case she had been presented with involved a mysterious poison that was killing young children all over the eastern part of the U.S.

Her work led to development of a test for botulism, the sometimes deadly toxin that entered the body through a variety of means including improperly processed or stored food. Her work saved untold hundreds of people and led to her truly understanding how important she could be.

As she stood, contemplating her life she was startled by the sound of someone knocking on the back door.

Knowing that the Swift home was protected by an alarm system that could only be bypassed if the visitor was wearing a special circuit in their watch, Anne went to the door without worrying who might be there.

“Quimby? Come on in,” she told the man standing there.

“Hello, Anne. How are you doing today?”

“I suppose that depends on the purpose of your visit, doesn’t it?”

Quimby Narz, her contact agent with the Bureau, smiled at her. He respected Anne for her directness as well as her willingness to get involved in several cases each year.

Sitting at the table and accepting a cup of coffee, he got the the point.

“We have a real poser here, Anne. About a year ago a man was located out in Seattle. Ordinary sort of guy. He had been hanging around the Belltown area out there for a month before he came to the attention of authorities.”

“Did he do something terrible?” she inquired.

“Nope. It seems that he wasn’t doing anything. Well, a little panhandling and some Dumpster diving, but he kept pretty much to himself evidently.”

“So, what’s the deal with him?”

“When the police decided to check him out they discovered that he had no I.D. and claimed to not be able to remember either his name or anything about himself except for the previous month or so.”

“Well,” started Anne. “You know that real amnesia is pretty rare. Did they say if he showed signs of trauma?”

“Nothing. Clean bill of health from the local hospital where they took him for observation.”

“You’ve got me a little confused, Quimby. Why are you telling me all this?”

Narz took another sip of his coffee and leaned back before continuing.

“I told you he was clean. Absolutely clean. No signs of anything wrong with the man. Not even dandruff. Yet, he had been living in doorways for at least a month or more. Then, things started to happen.”

“What things?”

“People started getting sick, and I mean *really* sick. Folks he had associated with on the street were being brought into hospitals right and left. Coughing up blood... choking... dying. More than seven in ten died within a week or so of being hospitalized.”

Anne whistled. She remembered a case study back in college dealing with the famous “Typhoid Mary.” Mary Mallon, a cook by trade, turned out to be the first identified healthy carrier of the deadly typhoid fever. Yet, she never got sick herself. She

asked agent Narz about any connection.

Shaking his head he told her, “Nobody thinks this is typhoid or things like that. With Mary they were able to detect the typhus in her blood. Our guy has nothing they can find. They’re not even certain if there is a real connection to him.”

They sat in silence for a minute before Anne asked, “Where is the man now?”

Quimby looked at her. His eyes told the story before he opened his mouth to speak. “He walked out of the hospital three weeks ago and nobody’s seen him since!”

“Oh, dear,” said Anne giving a heavy sigh. “What can I do to help?”

“Actually, nothing right now. Well, I mean nothing with any biological aspects. But, we need to have you review all of the material that the three hospitals in Seattle put together. That way, once we find the man we can try to get him here.”

“Right, Let’s just hope that you can get him here in quarantine. Otherwise, whoever brings him in may be subjected to whatever killed those people in Seattle!”

Three days later Anne received a call on her cell phone. It was Quimby Narz telling her that her lab was now available and that all materials had been sent out from Washington state.

Less than an hour later she parked in a reserved space around the corner from a local bank. Entering the lobby, she headed for the safe deposit box desk.

It took only a minute for the special agent to let her through the secret entrance to the lab area hidden behind the vault. This wasn’t an ordinary bank. It had been specially set up by the FBI to disguise the lab, and all of the tellers, managers and support people working there were FBI field agents. Of course, it also functioned as a full-service bank to keep up the pretense.

Anne was issued a special access badge, that would remain active for the duration of her assignment, and headed down the short corridor to her lab.

Inside, along with the most modern equipment available was her desk. And, on the desk was a stack of more than thirty file folders, each with more than fifty pages inside.

Taking a deep breath, she sat down and picked the folder from the top of the stack and began reading. Three hours later she picked up the sixth folder and opened it.

Everything she was reading showed a frighteningly similar pattern. Each person had developed a small cough, just the occasional one, but what doctors called, “productive,” meaning that phlegm was being expelled.

In each case, by the third day the cough had turned into something more sinister. Heavy, almost continuous coughing that included bloody phlegm. It was at this point—or for at least five of the first six—that they sought medical care.

Doctors had performed blood tests, bacteria scans, mucous studies. Just about everything Anne could see would be standard tests.

Many of the files she scanned through that day included interviews with the patients. Where had they been? Who had they associated with? Had anyone around them been ill? Again, all standard questions.

Then they started to die. Most either choked or began coughing up chunks of their own lungs. The descriptions and photographs in the files were heartbreaking and stomach-churning.

The phone on her desk rang once. Only one person had access to the number than changed with each new assignment.

She picked up the receiver and said, “Hello, Quimby. What’s on your mind?”

“Hi, Anne. I just wanted to see if you had the opportunity to peruse some of the records... and what you think, assuming that you have.”

“I’ve been through a half dozen of the files from front to back and scanned through another twenty. Pretty nasty. How many lived?”

“Three. There were five but two more died in the last couple days. At least one of the survivors is said to be getting better. Now, before you ask,” he said to answer the question that was on Anne’s lips, “we’ve arranged to have that one person transferred out here to your lab. Had to promise him money for his time, but he seems more than willing to get out of the weather for awhile.”

Anne asked for a few details including when the man would arrive. Narz told her the patient would arrive that weekend.

“We’ll put him in the isolation chamber, Anne. He’s probably tired as all heck of tests, but we’ll keep him busy Sunday and get him ready for you Monday morning.”

Anne completed her review of the remaining folders and went home. Both Tom and Damon were working late that evening so she had a couple hours to do some online research. Some of the symptoms matched those of known pulmonary diseases. Many things, for instance, might cause a continuous cough.

One or more could produce notable amounts of phlegm, and at least one might account for the tissue breakdown in the lungs.

But, no single disease had ever been known to provide the complete range of symptoms, including death.

I wonder what in the world this could be, she thought to herself. She sat at her computer, using her very special codes and permissions that gave her access to files on some servers not even their own IT people could ever see.

A thought came to her. *Perhaps this isn’t a disease at all. What about toxic agents? Inhaled acids? Other chemicals?*

She didn’t have any time to look into these questions as her husband and both children returned home shortly after she began pondering them.

Once everyone left the next day she sat back in front of her computer. After signing in she sat back, wondering where to start.

“Might as well look into acids,” she told herself. At first she looked at specific acids but soon decided that looking for symptoms of exposure to acids would serve her better. Hour after hour she read articles and reports about hundreds of incidents around the world where acids had played a part in injuries and death.

She broadened her search for other accounts of inhaled chemical deaths.

Of all she looked at, the incident at Bhopal, India was the most horrific. A chemical release at a major international corporation’s pesticide plant had killed thousands and sickened thousands of other, many of whom eventually died of their exposure.

What made her set that notion aside was the vast array of symptoms. Skin, eye and neurological disorders abounded. She contemplated this and came to the decision that a widespread accident like that was not the case in Seattle. After all, none of the people sickened or killed in Seattle showed any outer signs of exposure to anything worse than cold temperatures.

Another probable dead end, she told herself.

Anne wished that the files Narz had provided were in electronic form. She would love to be able to go through them at home.

But, why not! I can access just about anything. Why not the

hospitals' electronic records.

Though never trained as a hacker, Anne had picked up many skills; one of them was the ability to use her almost-global access capabilities to “get into” wherever she wished.

She began by accessing one of the hospital’s websites. Calling up a special program on her computer, Anne peeked and poked through the site until she detected an open port. This would allow her to gain access to those parts of their system supposedly protected by firewalls and other security measures.

It took less than five minutes before she located all of the patient record files. She knew that most hospital workers—doctors and nursing professionals—were so busy that only minimal security existed once she entered the mass storage area.

She thought for a minute, trying to remember a few of the names on her folders back at the lab. The first two evidently had not been patients at this hospital, but the third one had been.

She used another program on her computer that helped her copy over all of the pages and into bits regarding this patient, then turned to finding others. Within a half hour she had copied the records of four of the infected people, including the one who had survived.

The remainder of Anne’s day was spend going back over each and every detail of the four records. She made page after page of notes trying to find points of cross-reference. And that was what struck her a so odd.

Everybody had suffered the same symptoms, in the same order, and almost as if on a specified schedule.

Day 1: painful tickle sensation in the far back of the throat leading to coughing approximately every ten minutes.

Day 3: cough beginning to bring up phlegm. Also, those in-

fectected started having problems sleeping as their cough would not subside with sleep.

Day 4: most patients began seeking medical help as the coughing became almost constant.

Day 5: blood appearing in the phlegm. Patients beginning to have choking problems.

Day 6: patients with weakened immune systems died. Those with stronger systems began experiencing breakdown of lung tissues. Clumps of alveoli being coughed up.

Days 7 and 8: The day they would either plateau or die.

What Anne was startled to see, and must have missed in her previous read through of the records, was that no patient experienced fever, chills, or any other symptom that might indicate the body’s defense system was trying to fight a disease or injury.

She sat at her computer table shaking her head in wonder. *Is that even possible*, she asked herself trying to recall anything from her education or experience that might help her understand what was happening.

Anne glanced at the clock on the wall. She had about an hour before she would need to go down to the kitchen to prepare dinner. She spent her time accessing the records of one other hospital. Their system let her perform a search by symptom and eventually yielded eleven other set of records that she copied, and then she “let herself out” of the system, leaving no trace she had ever been there.

“You look a little preoccupied, dear,” her husband had mentioned at dinner that evening. “Everything alright?”

Anne looked deep into the eyes of the man she loved but had kept her double life secret from and lied. She hated doing it, but it was necessary.

“Just a bit tired, Damon,” she told him. “You and Tom are so busy at Enterprises, and Sandy is busy having a great summer before she goes back to high school... we haven’t had a vacation for two years. Guess I just need to get away for a few days.

He had suggested that she do exactly that. “Sandy? Can you go stay at the Prandit’s for, oh, let’s say a week?” Their daughter promised to ask her friend but was certain that it would be okay. “Tom and I need to be away all next week as it is. I’m heading to the Citadel and he’s off to that South Pacific island we will be using to launch the rockets that will go into building that space outpost. So, you should make a reservation somewhere and just go away for a bit.”

Anne didn’t argue. It would be an amazing alibi for spending more time at the lab. She hoped that everything might be cleared up in the week allowed, so she agreed.

Monday arrived and so did Anne. As she walked into her lab the first thing she saw was the disheveled man sitting on a hospital-style ben inside of the containment chamber on the far side of the room. He stared at her, then gave her a small, weak wave and laid back down.

She activated the two-way intercom system. “Good morning. My name is Barbara Boone,” she said giving him her primary cover name. “I’m not a medical doctor but I am a doctor of microbiology.”

He acknowledged her with a nod of his head, then said, “Pete. Pete Mobray. Am I gonna die, lady?”

Anne hated to lie to the man, so she told him straight out, “I don’t know, Pete. And, please call me Barbara. You’ve beaten the system so far and that’s a good sign. How much did they tell you at the hospital?”

He laid out his story. He had been living on the streets for more than two years, living off of handouts and the occasional stolen

piece of fruit or other food. One night about two weeks prior, he had developed his cough.

“Nothin’ to bad at first. Sort of like I get in the summer when all the pollen is out. But it got worse in a hurry.” He continued on with everything he could remember up until the eighth day when the hospital had sedated him. He spend three days in an induced coma so that he would not cough.

“They stuck all sort of tubes in my throat and into my lungs and kept drainin’ out the gunk. Then they woke me up to see if I could still breath. Must not have been too okay since they put me back to sleep pronto. Kept me like that until three days ago.”

She questioned him for a few minutes on what he had done for the week prior to getting his cough, but he didn’t remember anything specific.

“No walking into a cloud of vapor or anything that irritated your lungs right off?”

“No.”

“Did you eat anything strange... I mean something that you never had before?”

Pete had been lying on the bed, staring at the ceiling, but he turned his head to answer her last question. “Barbara, I live on the street. I can’t afford to be picky about what I eat. But, no, nothing out of the ordinary or from somewhere new.”

He appeared exhausted so Anne turned off the intercom and dimmed the lights in both the chamber and the lab room. While he slept she phoned agent Narz.

He was very excited when he heard her voice. “Anne! I think we know how these people were made sick.”

When he paused a second, Anne rushed in with, “Don’t keep

me in suspense, Quimby. What?”

“Police found the man who could be responsible for all this. Name’s Arnold Allan. He turned up in Boston and a BOLO issued by Seattle PD brought him to their attention. Unfortunately, word didn’t get to the Boston folks until at least five officers and their staff nurse came into contact with Allan.”

“When, Quimby?”

“Saturday. They got him into isolation this morning, but the damage is probably done. He’s on the way to you in a special iso-van. Should be there in about five hours. Now the clock is ticking, Anne. We’ve got six people in Boston that we know of who are going to start getting sick. We’re gonna need you to figure out what the incubation period is so that we know when they are gong to start getting ill.”

“Well, in the meantime, they need to be in an isolation ward under observation. Maybe if they get a heavy dose of antibiotics now we can stave off the problem. That is, if it is an antibody.” Anne bit her lower lip. She wished she had more information to go on.

When Pete woke up an hour later, Anne asked to be allowed to perform several tests on him. He agreed. Using the remote pantograph arms, or “waldoes,” she drew samples of his blood and saliva, and did a mouth swab for culturing. She also, on a whim, took hair samples. Each of these were placed in a special tray and would be used by a series of machines under isolated conditions.

As she set up each of the tests, Anne wondered if Pete were still contagious. There was only one certain way to ascertain this, and Anne didn’t want to expose another human to potential death. She knew that a lab rat might give an indication, but it also might not. Not every disease or organism that affected people did the same in rodents.

Sighing, she waited for the test results.

As the hospitals had indicated, there were no pathogens in the blood, nor were there any unexpected bacteria. The culture of the blood and saliva would require at least 24-hours so she was left with testing the hair samples. She cut one hair and follicle into tiny pieces and then did a DNA test. There was nothing out of the ordinary except she could see that he had a small genetic mutation, one that was associated with alcoholism.

She made a note to see if all of the others had this same mutation; it might prove to be of some help in answering whether everybody might be susceptible to whatever this was.

Anne next checked another sample for signs of drugs, metals and known poisons. The human hair, she knew, was an amazing storehouse for such information.

The results yielded signs of alcohol—this did not surprise her—plus a high level of nicotine—another non-surprise. What it did show was a curious past week or so. Certain amino acids that would normally be located throughout each strand were either missing or were in minute amounts. This was the first solid indication that his body had undergone some radical processes during his time in the hospital in Seattle.

She called up the blood and urine tests from the hospital lab. They confirmed her findings of nothing more insidious in the blood than traces of alcohol and cigarettes. They had performed no cultures so she had nothing to compare.

She and Pete spend more than an hour talking that afternoon. He tried to remember details of who he might have met; who might have done anything to him. Try as he might, he had nothing to tell her of any real help.

She helped him prepare to be transferred into a medical ward in the building, one of six that all faced into a control room.

As soon as he was ready, Anne pushed a button and the wall to the left of his current isolation chamber opened. His bed was moved via a magnetic induction motor down a dark corridor and into room #1.

She closed the chamber and set the decontamination program to run. In fifteen minutes the room would be 100% germ free, filled with totally new air and then sealed back up.

Anne was surprised to see that the man Quimby believed might be responsible for everything had already arrived and was currently in room #4.

Before she could see to him, she checked on Pete. He had raised the head of his bed up and was staring at the newcomer.

Anne could see his mouth moving, so she turned on his intercom.

“That’s him! I know him. He’s the new guy out on the streets of Seattle!”

CHAPTER 2 /

MAN IN A BOTTLE

THE effect on Pete Mobray was immediate and intense. It was obvious that memories were pouring back into Pete’s mind. He was pointing at the man Narz had called Arnold Allan.

Seizing on the opportunity to find out more, Anne asked Pete, “Are you certain he is from Seattle?” He nodded. “When did he show up there” Or at least when did you first come into contact with him?”

Pete thought a second. “I heard some of the folks sayin’ that a new guy appeared— ummmm— maybe four or five weeks ago. Wait. What day is it?” Anne told him. “I’m pretty sure I first heard of him three weeks ago and a guy named Bobby said he’s been around maybe ten days. That was about the time Bobby started getting sick.”

Annes mind raced. So many questions. She took a breath and asked, “Did you ever get near that man or just close to Bobby?”

Again, Pete tried to think and then brightened. “I met the guy on the 11th. Yeah. that’s right. The day after Bobby got sick I ran into— uh, I think his name is Arnie. Anyway, he was pleasant enough but claimed he didn’t know who he is or where he was.”

“Did you touch him?”

“Well, we shook hands and all. Only saw him that day ‘cause I wanted to move my stuff over to a new place. Didn’t even see Bobby after that. Heard that he got real sick and then we didn’t hear anything. That usually means they’ve died.” He looked sadly at Anne.

She swung her gaze around to the new man, Arnold, or Arnie.

He appeared to be in good health and was sitting on his bed, swinging his legs forward and back, with a big smile on his face.

Cutting off the intercom to Pete's room she opened the one to Arnie's. "Mr. Allan? My name is Barbara Boone. I'm a microbiologist and in charge of this lab."

"I guess my name is Arnie Allan, miss. I honestly don't remember if it is or not, it's just the name on the ID I found in my wallet one day."

At her prompting, he told her the short story of his life.

He awoke, he said, one day in a doorway of an abandoned bar. Locating a newspaper he discovered that he was in Seattle. He was hungry and thirsty so he asked a passing man for help. The man had punched him in the chest and had stalked off.

Confused, Arnie had tried to find out more about where he was. Then it came to his attention that he couldn't remember the day before. In fact, he could remember nothing about himself before he woke up that day.

"Miss Boone? I didn't even know my own name. I had a wallet in my pants and even a couple hundred dollars. I went to a café across the street and had breakfast and looked through that wallet. Know what I found?"

"No. I'm afraid I can't, Mr. Allan."

"Well, I found no pictures, no credit cards, no little scraps of paper, and not even a business card. All that was there was the cash and an old ID card with the name 'Arnold S. Allan' and an address in Macon, Georgia. You can probably tell from my lack of Southern accent that I probably didn't grow up there. I may not even be this Arnold Allan."

They talked a few more minutes before she asked for permission to perform test on him. He agreed, so she had his bed

moved back through the now-sterilized corridor and into her isolation chamber.

He provided blood, saliva, urine and hair samples plus a skin scraping she took from the bottom of his foot.

Food was sent to the chamber and he sat eating it while she performed some of her tests.

While waiting for some of the results they talked more about his days in Seattle.

"Did you meet a lot of people," she asked.

"Oh, two or three dozen for sure. Nice people. A couple seemed a bit crazy but I guess living on the streets can make you that way. Made friends with a couple. Then, some of them took sick. I guess that happens a lot as well, huh? Anyway, about a week or so ago the police picked me up for vagrancy. I couldn't provide them with any good ID so they took me to jail for a night. Next morning someone took me to a hospital. Said they needed to check me out."

"Did they tell you anything," Anne asked.

"Well, one doctor told me that a couple of the people I met were either real sick or had died."

"Do you remember the doctor's name?"

He gave her the name and she excused herself. Turning off the intercom she called up the hospital's phone number and dialed.

"Yes. I wondered if I might speak to Doctor Tony Litton, please," she asked once she had given the switchboard her alias.

"I'm sorry, madam, but Doctor Litton is—uh—he's no longer with the hospital."

Anne contemplated what to do. She decided to press on.

“Okay. I should have mentioned this before, but I am with the FBI. I am going to ask you something, and you can either answer it or get me the hospital Administrator. Did Doctor Litton die?”

She heard the gasp of the girl at the other end. “Oh, my god. How did you know?” the girl whispered.

“We are investigating his and the other deaths you’ve recently had. Can you tell me if there are any other people who have become ill? Outside patients or hospital personnel?”

The switchboard operator had to place Anne on hold. In seconds a stern, male voice inquired, “Just who is this and what reason do you have for asking about confidential hospital business?”

Although Anne disliked asserting authority she actually did not have, she liked people such as the man on the phone even less.

“This is special agent Barbara Boone, FBI. Now, you get this. Your hospital and two others in Seattle have had a series of patients die practically coughing up their lungs. Now it seems that at least one of the people there who treated these patients has died. Unless you want a squad of agents at your door in half an hour, and the press corps of greater Seattle soon after that, you’ll alter your attitude and cooperate with this investigation. Questions?”

She could just imagine the face of the man at the other end. She could hear him gasping to catch his breath. She continued in a less menacing tone, “I do not know who you are but I can guess that you might be the Administrator at the hospital. You, and by that I really mean all of us, have a very serious problem. If Doctor Litton did die after being exposed to one or more of your patients, then I need to know about it.”

“Okay, Miss Boone. I apologize for the way I began this conversation. I am afraid, however, that without having an actual FBI

agent here showing me both a badge and a warrant, I can be of no assistance to you. I hope you understand.”

“And, I hope that you understand that you may have an epidemic. Anybody who came in contact with patients like Arnold Allan, Peter Mowbray and the others brought there are in danger of having contracted whatever it was that killed your patients. And those people exposed to the patients may pass along whatever this is to others before they, too, die. You know. Other medical staff. Family members. Children. Hospital administrators!”

Anne hammered the last home.

“Now. Tell me who you are and I’ll be sure to pass along your total lack of cooperation. I’ll make sure that the press has it in five minutes. and,” she said consulting her computer screen, “I’ll make sure that they call you at your 206-867-5309 number. Okay?”

“Now you listen here. You can’t—” but that was all he got out. Anne hung up on him.

Give him a minute or two to stew about this and then have Quimby put the thumbscrews on him, she thought as she dialed the agent’s number.

Explaining what had just occurred, she requested that he have a local agent show up to put a bit of fright into his life. “But, make sure that the agent comes wearing a respirator mask and latex gloves,” she advised.

Five minutes later her phone rang. “Hey, Anne. Quimby. I called your man and he was apoplectic with fear. Good job. If you call him again he will be cooperative. Have a nice night!”

Anne redialed the hospital and was immediately put through. The administrator was almost in tears. He apologized and swore that he would be helpful. He asked that she hold for a

few minutes while he gathered some of the doctors and nurses that had been working with the mysteriously ill patients.

When he came back on the line his voice was strained and squeaky. “We’ve had another death. A nurse that saw Mr. Allan in isolation went home sick three days ago, and she was found dead this morning. What is happening? What can we do?”

Anne tried to calm the man. She told him to have all staff that had direct contact with the patients isolated. “Might as well put them all in one room. It’s doubtful that they can make each other worse.”

He promised to have all records emailed to her within the hour.

Anne returned to her studies but her mind kept wandering. She had skipped lunch and needed some fresh air, so she got up and headed out of the lab.

A walk around the downtown area helped clear her head. She greeted several friends and even accepted an invitation to The Glass Cat for a cup of coffee.

“Hello, Mrs. Swift,” the beautiful Pakistani girl behind the counter greeted her. “I thought you were out of town. At least, that’s what Sandy said.”

Bashalli Prandit was her daughter’s best friend and was Tom’s frequent—and only—date these days. Her family had moved from Pakistan just as she was turning teenage. This coffee shop belonged to her brother, Moshan, and she worked there part time while attending the local art college.

“Hello, Bashalli. Oh, I’m nearly out of town. Just heading out as a matter of fact. Please thank your parents again for letting Sandy stay with you until Sunday.”

Darn it!, Anne thought. I have to be more careful. I wasn’t even thinking when I came out.

She accepted her coffee, thanked the dark-haired girl, and joined her friend at their table.

An hour later she returned to the lab. As promised, all of the hospital’s files had been sent to her. She was shocked to learn that five of the people who had worked with the dead patients had also come down with the mystery illness. Or, condition. Or, whatever it was: Anne was stumped.

Of these, she now knew that two had died. The other three were showing symptoms consistent with day three or four. But when had they actually contracted whatever it was? She made another call to the hospital and soon had a partial answer.

The two that had died were the first two to see both Pete Mowbray and Arnie Allan. Pete on one day and Arnie five days later.

“That means,” she told Quimby when he called for a status update, “that Pete may be the carrier. But that doesn’t make sense. Nobody out on the street who frequently were near Pete came down with symptoms until they had met Arnie.”

“Anne. You’re the expert in this, so I refer to your judgement. The notes made by Doctor Litton say that he believed that Arnie Allan was the carrier. His interviews with all the patients show that nobody got sick until they met Arnie. The question is, or I guess the questions are, how and why.”

Anne could provide no answers.

The following morning the cultures from Pete’s blood and saliva were ready. She used the waldoes to remove the petri dishes from the incubator and placed them in the proper wall cubby.

She brought the first sample, his blood, into the chamber holding the lab’s ultra-high definition microscope. Despite the seriousness of the situation she couldn’t help but smile.

The microscope was a marvel. Using a combination of an ultra-

high-def video camera and microscopic lens system, it sent its 30,000 pixels per square centimeter images to a computer capable of taking the data and digitally enhancing it significantly. Though not as powerful as her electron microscope, it was more that twenty times better than the finest traditional one.

What amused her was that the technology had been invented by her husband, Damon Swift, who had no idea that his wife was even using a SwiftScope, let alone being one of the foremost experts in its use.

Anne scanned the entire petri dish and then scanned it again. She sat back and rubbed her eyes. Nothing. Absolutely nothing was growing in the dish. As she expected, the blood cells were dead. But she had expected some sort of bacterial growth.

She repeated the scan with Pete's saliva culture. Here she found all of the normal bacteria she expected from someone's mouth: staphylococcus epidermidis, aureus and mitis; lactobacillus; enterococcus faecalis; and more than a dozen others. But these were all in normal concentrations.

As she was contemplating this lack of information, her cell phone rang. The caller ID simply said, "HA."

"Hello, Harlan," she said to the man on the other end, Harlan Ames was the chief of security at Swift Enterprises and the only person outside of the FBI that knew of Anne's association with that agency. It had been determined a few years earlier that he needed to know about her involvement so that he might assist in maintaining her secret in case Damon or, later, Tom might become suspicious.

"Anne. How's the vacation going?" he inquired.

"Funny, Harlan. Actually, things are a bit hectic and confusing right now. But I have a few minutes here while I try to regain my sanity. What can I do for you?"

"Well, I wanted to let you know that Damon is going to extend his stay out at the Citadel by a day, but that Tom is probably coming back on Sunday instead of Monday from Luunai island."

"Oh. That might be a little inconvenient." She told him about her lack of findings, finishing with, "I can't even get anyone in here to assist right now. Wiley would be my first choice, but he is recovering from having a hip replaced and couldn't stand or walk or even sit long enough. So, I'm on my own." She sighed.

"Any chance that I could help with anything? I'm just an overpaid cop now, but I started out pre med at school. Couldn't take the blood and stuff, so I changed to law."

Anne thought a moment. I could use a second pair of eyes to go through all of the records of the patients. Would you want to come down and help today with going through all of the paperwork?"

Harlan laughed. "Half my day is spent with paperwork. I'm practically an expert. Sure. I'll be there in a half hour. Phil can take over for the rest of today. Even tomorrow if necessary."

Good to his word, he arrived and was ushered into the lab twenty-eight minutes later.

After greetings were exchanged they got down to the business at hand. Anne explained what he should look for.

"Anything that is different, no matter how small. I've pulled up a healthy set of tests and results. Mine, actually. Flag anything in any of their records that are out of norm with mine. Somewhere in all that," she pointed at the stack of folders, "has to be *something*."

In the middle of her last sentence, Anne watched the lights flicker and then die. In seconds the backup power generator for the building kicked in and the lights came back on strong.

She got up from her desk and went down the hall to see how her two patients were doing. Her first check was on Pete. He seemed to be asleep and probably had no idea what had just happened.

But, Anne's heart almost came up her throat when she looked toward Arnie's room. The doorway was open and Arnie stood in it, smiling sheepishly.

"Um, do you think I should have stayed in there when the door popped open?"

CHAPTER 3 /

ANOTHER ANDROMEDA STRAIN?

HARLAN arrived behind her a second later. "What's going on?" he asked just as a red light began flashing on one wall and a klaxon began sounding an alarm.

Anne turned and pushed him out of the room, slamming the door behind her.

"Harlan, down the hall and into decontamination. The containment was broken in the outage and our prime suspect came out. We have to get cleaned, immediately!"

Continuing to shove the much larger man, Anne and Harlan quickly sprinted down the hall and into the de-con room. She indicated one of the two booths, saying, "Just get in there and strip. Press the red button and close your eyes until the computer tells you to open them, then eyes wide open. No matter what, do what the computer tells you!"

Anne jumped into the adjoining booth, pulling her blouse over her head as she entered.

She heard Harlan's booth activate at the same time she pressed the button in hers. Both of them were subjected to a series of cleaning steps designed to get virtually everything off the surface of their bodies. Even, as Anne had indicated, their eyes.

Ten minutes later, the blowers wound up to dry them. Soon after that clean hospital-style 'scrubs' were delivered via a small door in the wall. They dressed and then met back in the larger room.

"Now can you slow down and tell me what just happened," he asked.

Anne told him everything that she believed had occurred, finishing with, “And the unknown factor right now is whether we were exposed just by being in the same room as Arnie Allan. If whatever he has is airborne, we may be in trouble. I’m so, so sorry, Harlan. I never thought for a minute that I’d be putting you in danger by asking you down here.”

He placed a reassuring hand on her shoulder. She looked up into his steely eyes, and he told her, “I have one-hundred-and-ten percent confidence in you, Anne. Let’s call Quimby and get him to send in a team of experts. We’ll get to the bottom of this in no time.”

She sadly shook her head. “I’m afraid that once the containment was broken the computer system put this place in lock-down. We can’t get out and nobody can come in. No exceptions until both I and an outside control person are convinced that we have the solution.”

What she didn’t add was that if they couldn’t find a solution and died, the lab would be ‘cleansed’ and then shut down forever. They would remain inside, slowly decomposing until ten years passed. At that time the building would be demolished.

But, now was not the time to think of such things. She motioned to the door. “Let’s get back to the lab and start going through everything. I’ve got a bunch of tests to make and you’ve got about two solid day’s of reading to get through.”

Once they returned to the lab room, Anne called Quimby Narz. He knew the lab had locked itself, but he didn’t know why. He was alarmed to find out that both Anne and Harlan were inside at the time.

“Okay, Anne. We’ll get you out, somehow.”

She reminded him of the security measures. “It’s not worth the possible contamination, Quimby. However, can you get another team assembled in another lab? Maybe they can help us

perform control tests. I’m really hoping that we can find some deviation that will point the way to the solution.”

He said that he could have everything arranged by the following morning.

Anne and her unfortunate guest set to work. Knowing that the SwiftScope had revealed nothing in Pete’s cultures, she decided to prepare a section for use in the electron microscope.

She began by fixing the specimens to preserve their biologic nature using a quick-freeze method involving a dip in liquid nitrogen. As a precaution in case the nitrogen did something, she also quickly freeze-dried another section of the culture medium and prepped yet another using no fixing method at all.

One at a time, she had the specimens moved into the scanning chamber. The first one quickly came into focus and she look for any signs. Seeing nothing that might be considered unusual, she took a series of digital photographs of the specimen and then removed it.

The second specimen yielded exactly the same results. An overlay of the first photos and the second showed identical lacks of anything that should not be in human saliva.

Ditto the third saliva sample. She turned to preparing the blood cultures as well as a set containing uncultured blood.

All of the cultured samples prove to be as devoid of clues as their saliva counterparts.

Things changed, slightly, when Anne brought the first blood sample into focus. Her gasp registered in Harlan’s brain.

“What’ve you got?”

“Take a look at this. It may not mean a lot to you, but once you’ve studied it, I’ll bring up a sample of my own blood.

While Harlan stared at the screen, Anne too; a disposable lancet and pricked her index finger. She placed a drop of her blood onto a clean specimen holder and used the lab's vacuum device to suck all of the air from it.

Placing it into the electron microscope, she asked Harlan, "Do you have a good idea of what you are seeing in Pete's blood?"

"I believe so. It's been a few years, but I can see the red and white blood cells and the plasma and all that. Not sure I see anything out of the ordinary."

"Take a look at my blood." She moved her sample into the scope's field. A moment later it came into sharp focus. She looked at Harlan expecting him to jump up and should, "I see it!" but she was to be disappointed. He looked over her blood for a minute before giving up.

"Sorry, Anne. I'm really out of practice on this. What am I suppose to be seeing?"

Anne pressed a button to take a high-definition photo of the sample and then moved to her computer screen. "Let me isolate a few red blood cells from mine—" she performed a few manipulations, "—and then the same for Pete's blood." Again, she tapped a few commands into the computer and used the mouse to click on several object on the screen.

"Now can you see it?" she asked as she placed both resulting photos side-by-side on the screen.

"Oh, my go—" was all Harlan could get out. He immediately saw the difference now. While both exhibited the typical doughnut shape, the surface of Anne's cells were perfectly smooth. Pete's, on the other hand, each had a series of small bumps all over the surface.

"Those bumps. What are they, Anne?" he asked.

"I don't know yet, but I have the feeling they may help us get out of here sooner rather than later."

Anne prepared a specimen from Arnie's blood and placed it into the electron microscope. As soon as it was focused on a pair of blood cells, Anne say something that had her scrambling back to her computer. She called up the original photos of Pete's blood and located a white blood cell. She studied it and then turned to face the screen from the electron scope.

Pete's white cells were mostly round which she expected. They displayed the typical slight dip in the surface. What they had that she didn't expect were a few dozen micro-nodules stuck to the surface. She could tell that they weren't part of the cell, but something that had adhered to each cell.

Harlan was watching over her shoulder and saw the same thing. "Those shouldn't be there, should they?" he asked.

"Nope. Let's look at Arnie's white cells."

Arnie Allan's white blood cells appeared to be perfectly normal. No nodules. No sign of any abnormality. Almost identical to Anne's own 'control' cells.

She looked at Harlan and shook her head.

"I've got to get more blood in here from the others. We can't do anything until we find out if it is Arnie with the strange cells or everyone else. I can't just take my own blood as being the norm."

"Take mine," Harlan offered. At least we'll have two examples. Besides. If we start to get sick, isn't it a good idea to have something from before to compare to?" He looked knowingly at Anne.

"Right," she said after a moment. "And, I'll get Quimby to take samples from some of his agents that have never been close to

our guests. The other lab can do the same scans and then we'll have a larger control group.

A call to agent Narz started the ball rolling. He said that the second lab would be up and running by 8:00 a.m. in the morning. In the meantime he would have at least a dozen agents in to have blood drawn.

"By the time the crew gets into the lab, the blood will be waiting for them, Anne."

All she and Harlan could do was to busy themselves with their current lines of inquiry. But, before she settled in to investigate the strange micro-nodules on the blood cells, she made a check of the isolation ward and the two patients.

Pete had woken up and was oblivious to the recent event. Arnie had returned to his room and closed the door. Anne would have liked to go into the larger room, but knew there was a possibility of contamination. She wished that she knew if the disease—or whatever it was—could be transmitted via the air or whether direct contact were required.

She returned to the lab and used the intercom to ask them if they were doing okay. Both reported that they were comfortable. She shut off Pete's circuit and began asking Arnie some questions.

"Arnie? Do you know what is happening? I mean," she added seeing his confused look on her screen, "do you know that people have become sick and even died after they met you?"

He shook his head. "Miss Boone. I don't even know what went on in my life more than a month or so back. All I know is that I was picked up by the Seattle police, taken to the university hospital, and was poked and prodded for a week or so. Then, one night I got fed up and walked out. Next thing I knew I was out in Boston getting picked up again. I don't even remember anything from the time I walked out the door of the hospital."

"You really can't recall anything. Not even little bits of memories? It would help me try to find out what's going on. Please try."

He looked directly into the camera and shrugged his shoulders.

All he could recall was a vague notion that he had been in some sort of medical facility for a long time. "I don't know where or even if it was real," he told Anne. "All I can dredge up is some place with nurses dressed up like soldiers and lots of bright lights and tubes and—" he suddenly stopped, eyes going wide. "Oh, jeez. Miss Boone? There were tubes and machines all around me. And those nurses and doctors, I guess, all in fatigues or something like that."

She prompted him for more.

After contemplating it for a moment, he continued, more slowly this time, "I kind of remember being asleep a lot. Then, every now and again I would wake up and all those things were surrounding me." He stopped again and appeared to be looking inside his own mind for something.

"Wait. They were all in some sort of top to bottom gear. I couldn't see any faces. They were all round and shiny and—sort of like mirrors. Yeah. Like that."

He could remember nothing more but said that he would try. Anne suggested that they resume talking the next morning, and then closed off the connection.

Turning to Harlan she asked, "Well, what do you think of all *that*?"

With a rueful chuckle, Harlan replied, "If I didn't know any better I'd say the man is recalling that movie. *Andromeda Strain*. You know. Satellite comes back to earth and lands in a small New Mexico village where it kills everybody except an old alcoholic and a baby. A team of scientists gets locked into a

research facility trying to find out why they lived and what can be done to stop whatever it is that kills”

Anne shook her head. “Not the sort of movie I generally go to, Harlan. Sorry.”

“That’s okay. This is kinda like that. We’re locked in this lab with Arnie who is probably the source of the deadly... whatever it is... and we only have a little time to discover the secret before—”

He stopped talking and reddened.

“What? Before what, Harlan?”

He took a deep breath. “Before the government drops a nuclear bomb on the facility to eradicate everything, including the scientists that can’t get out.” He gulped. “Sorry. Now I wish I had kept all that to myself.”

Anne smiled. “Not to worry. If we can’t find the solution, we might face something. But, I don’t think the government will drop a bomb on us.”

They looked at each other for a few seconds and then went back to work.

Before heading down the hall to a bunk room that included four fold-down cots, they managed to get another three hours of study in.

Bright and early, Harlan got up, noticing that Anne’s cot was empty and that the smell of fresh coffee was coming from the break room next door. After a quick shower he dressed in some clean scrubs and left the sleeping quarters.

Anne had left a note propped up against the coffee maker:

Help yourself, Harlan. There are breakfast burritos and frozen waffles in the freezer. I suggest the waffles, personally. See you in the lab when you’re ready.

Anne

He decided to pass, for now, of both of the foods. So, he poured himself a large mug, added his usual three packets of sugar and a lot of skim milk and walked down the hall.

Quimby was on the phone with Anne as Harlan walked into the lab. She had him on speakerphone. He was saying, “I’ve managed to get two of the three people I wanted. They’re in our facility in the midwest. They have all the records you do, plus the blood samples from our agents. I expect to have results in an hour or two. I’m sending you the direct line number and codes. As much as I need to be kept informed, I really don’t want to be a conduit. I’d likely lose important information.”

“That’s find, Quimby,” Anne told the agent. “Who’s leading the team out there?”

“A new man to us. Comes from the Army. Has a lot of experience with serology and germ warfare. Uh, name’s Brian Sykes. That’s with a ‘y,’ not an ‘i’ by the way. He has Allie Stokes with him now and I expect David Plane to be there this afternoon.”

She thanked him and hung up. Turning to Harlan, she asked, “Know of any of those three? Oh, and good morning to you.”

“Heard of the Plane guy. He did some contract work for the Secret Service when I was an agent. Mostly along the lines of ‘how do we protect the president from a chemical or bio attack?’ ”

Anne had already used the medical robots in the isolation rooms to draw fresh blood samples and was readying them.

She wanted to see if there were any differences in the twenty-two hours since her last tests.

Both results showed almost the same nodules on Pete's red blood cells. Harlan spotted something and brought it to Annes attention. "Aren't there fewer bumps today than yesterday?" he asked.

She called up the previous day's closeup shots and compared them. Harlan was right. Where there were between twenty and twenty-five bumps on the visible sides of most of his cells yesterday, there were only about eighteen on today's sample.

"If, and right now it is a big if, but if those bumps have something to do with the illness, then maybe Pete's system is fighting them off. Oh, I wish we had all of the blood samples drawn out in Seattle. Then, we would be able to see if a reduction signals that the patient is getting better—maybe even developing a defense against the illness—or if it means things are getting worse. We'll have to keep a close eye on Pete."

When she had completed looking at the electron microscope readouts, she decided to try to separate some of the bumps from Pete's blood cells. This meant using viable, live blood and the SwiftScope at its highest magnification. She pulled out all of the micro-instruments she might need and placed them into the exchange chamber of the scope.

Twenty minutes later she was no closer to harvesting any of the bumps than when she began. About that time her phone rang.

"Am I speaking to Anne Swift? This is Brian Sykes out in Iowa."

"Hello, Brian. Yes. This is Anne." They exchanged a password and both entered a series of numbers into their phones to lock them in a secure configuration. She continued, "Can I assume that Quimby Narz briefed you about the situation?"

He affirmed that this was the case.

"Okay. We've had a containment breach here, so we really need to make sure we don't spin our wheels. Here's what we've found that your paperwork won't include."

She spent the next fifteen minutes briefing the man on the finding of the nodules on Pete's red cells.

When she finished, Brian suggested that she send all of her data to his lab. "You can concentrate on getting more blood cultures and scans over the next couple of days. We'll take on the task of analyzing all of the existing data. I've been provided with a few blood samples from one of the hospitals out in Washington state. We'll get to those right away and see what we find. hopefully, your theory that they are either the cause of the illness, or a body-made antibody, will pan out."

Anne prepared all of the data and photos of the blood cells and got it all sent off two hours later.

The following afternoon they were no closer to finding a solution. Anne had managed to cut away a portion of the blood cell with a few nodules and had spent all her time studying it.

While Harlan created a cross-reference chart of Pete Mobray's symptoms to compare those with everyone that had died, Anne went to the kitchen area and made fresh coffee and heated up a couple frozen cinnamon buns.

As she re-entered the lab she was just in time to hear Harlan let out a little cough. She stopped. He turned around, smelling the cinnamon and smiled.

And, let out another small cough.

The smile drained from his face as he realized what had happened. He was about to say something when he saw Anne drop the plate of pastries.

She had let out a little cough.

CHAPTER 4 /

OH... *THAT'S* WHAT HAPPENED?

MOMENTS later, she had drawn blood samples from herself and Harlan. She rushed through the preparation process and got the first sample into the electron microscope.

“Well, I think I can safely say that the number of the nodule bumps increases as the illness progresses, Harlan. My blood from yesterday showed none of them. Now, I see a trio of them on the facing surface.”

She repeated the scan using his blood sample. Almost identical results.

We have to tell Quimby,” Anne asserted.

“Perhaps we should call Brian at the other lab. You know that Narz doesn’t want to have to pass along vital info.” He coughed again.

Anne made the call.

“Oh. And when did you get infected?” the other scientist asked.

“Day before yesterday. Probably,” she consulted her watch, “forty two hours ago.”

“We’re going along like gangbusters, but have come up with nothing so far. I suggest that you take a course of strong antibiotics, just in case, while we all struggle through this.”

That gave Anne an idea. After giving herself and Harlan shots of vancomycin—one of the few antibiotics that had proven to be effective against such things as MRSA—and good old-fashioned penicillin, she went back to studying the blood cell nodules.

Harlan announced that he had completed his chart so he and Anne sat together going through it. All that it proved was that each person infected had probably met Arnie Allan two or three days before they began coughing, and that they mostly followed the day one to day seven course with most dying after that point.

“I’m kinda out of my element here, Anne,” he confessed. I just wish that there was something the policeman in me could do.”

Anne looked at the calendar on the wall. Today was Thursday. She went to it and, using a red marker pen, wrote on it “Day 1.” She also penned in Friday, Saturday and Sunday, the day she was suppose to be safely at home for Sandy and Tom. *That will be day four*, she thought to herself. About the time the coughing becomes continuous.

By that evening she believed that she had almost isolated one of the nodules. She interspersed her work with the blood cells with performing some basic research on the Internet. She was about to stop to prepare their dinner when something caught the corner of her eye.

Harlan started when Anne slammed her hand down on her desktop. “Why didn’t I think of it, Harlan?”

“What?”

“DNA. Simple, blessed DNA. I’ve never looked to see if there is some sort of genetic defect. Something that might have been introduced into people that effected their DNA. What a dummy I am!”

Harlan tried to console her, but she felt as if she had let him down. He offered to make their meal while she went to work extracting and looking at the cellular DNA.

By the time he returned with the food twenty minutes later, she was sitting in front of the SwiftScope screen. Without turn-

ing, she dejectedly said, “Nothing. All’s normal in both Pete and Arnie. Now I’m really stumped.”

Harlan sat down next to her. “Is there anything else in the blood you can put under the lens?”

Anne shook her head slowly.

He thought a moment. “How about inside those bumps?”

Her mind was racing elsewhere, so Anne absently asked, “What do you mean?”

“I guess I mean is there anything like other DNA or stuff inside those bumps?”

She slowly turned to face him, eyes slightly red from staring so intently at the scope for hours on end. Then, he noticed a glint in her eye. Her attention returned and she looked at him, eyes now going wide in amazement.

Saying nothing, she turned to the current sample under the scope. The blood cell was ruptured from where she extracted it’s DNA, but the outer wall was mostly intact. Using micro forceps and a micro cutting blade she cut into the side of the larger of the five bumps visible.

Even under full magnification it was difficult to see anything inside, but there, almost a ghostly pale, was a twisted helix. DNA.

Anne extracted it and prepared it for use in the electron microscope. A half hour later, food completely forgotten, she had it in focus.

“Harlan. That’s not human DNA. I don’t recognize it, but it is certainly not suppose to be there.”

They placed an immediate call to the sister lab. Brian Sykes was summoned from his office. Anne excitedly told him of their findings.

“Wow, Anne. Amazing. Sounds like nobody could have found that except you. Good job. Get me the picture of that helix and we’ll identify it. You get a good night’s sleep. We’ll burn the midnight oil on this and should have answers by morning.”

She was mentally exhausted, and the coughing which now came about every three minutes was taking its toll on them both. She agreed and said she would expect a call by 7:00 a.m. the next day.

But, Friday morning came and there was no word from the Iowa lab. She called them only to find out that Brian Sykes had left the facility late the prior evening and had not yet returned.

“What about the helix, David?”

“I’m sorry? What helix are you talking about, Anne,” the assistant asked.

“The helix photo we took of the DNA inside the bumps on the blood cells, that’s what helix.”

“Anne. I don’t know what to say. We haven’t had anything come through from your end the past two days. At least, nothing I have seen.”

Anne was totally dismayed. She hung up and called Quimby Narz. Telling him of her discover and the apparent loss of the data, she told him, “I don’t know what’s happening out there, Quimby, but Harlan’s life and my life and who knows how many others depends on finding out what that DNA actually is.”

He was as bothered as she was. “I’ll get right on it, Anne,” he promised.

Harlan placed a hand on Annes shoulder. “I’m getting bad feeling about this, Anne. I think it’s time that I called in some friends.”

When she asked what he meant, he simply said, “Call it the disbeliever in me, but I’m getting the impression that there are some people out there who may not want us to find out what’s going on. I have a few good friends in the Secret Service who can do a little research for us. You know. Find out who all the players are and their actual loyalties?”

“Call Quimby then,” Anne suggested.

Shaking his head, Harlan said, “I’ve known Quimby for five years, but I really don’t know him. To protect ourselves we have to assume that everyone involved right now may be in collusion. No. We’ve got to do an end-around on Quimby. At least, for now.”

He pulled out two cell phones and selected a very blocky-looking one. He turned it on and entered, what seemed to Anne, better than twenty keystrokes before it finally ‘beeped’ at him. Next, he dialed a nine digit number that Anne assumed was an abbreviated phone number.

“John? Harlan. Got a major problem. I don’t know how much has filtered out but there is a bad infection that started with a guy out in Seattle and is now here in my home town.”

He listened for a moment before saying, “Yeah. I thought you might have a few feelers out. Listen, I’m locked in a secure FBI lab with the guy we think is the source. And, the doctor I’m working with and I have been infected.”

He told the person on the other end about the “missing” genetic data.

“Can you do a hard check on the following people?” He gave the other person Quimby’s name along with the three assigned to the Iowa lab.

“Pretty sure,” he said in response to a question. “I’ve run into him a few time back when I was there. Seemed a pretty

squared away guy, but he's on my list." He listened again, then, "Right. I have to light a bonfire under you. If things go to schedule, we've only got a few days to solve this, or it becomes someone else's problem, if you understand what I mean. Call me in an hour with whatever you have. Protocol twenty-seven."

With that, he hung up. Turning to Anne he tried to explain the conversation, but she stopped him.

"It all seemed pretty straightforward. Let's hope your friend can help us. For now, I have to get back to trying to locate what DNA that might be."

She began pouring through screen after screen of potential DNAs. By the time Harlan's Secret Service contact called back she had it narrowed down to five possibilities, none of which was a perfect match.

Answering with a simple, "Yes," he stood listening for almost three minutes before responding. "Okay. So he's as above board as the rest, but is a little too squeaky clean? Is agent Preperneau still there? She has a an uncanny ability to ferret out where records have been manipulated. Have her take this on. Check back hourly. Mucho, mucho!"

He turned to Anne. "It appears that we have a team in Iowa that is clean. Except for Brian Sykes. Turns out he recently came from the military. Highly accredited and practically forced on Quimby. His records show him to have absolutely no bad marks. Not even a hangnail. I don't trust people like that."

He saw that Anne wanted to say something so he stopped talking and nodded toward her.

"I'm fairly certain that I've isolated the DNA to one of five things, but the one it most closely resembles is simple scrofula." Seeing no hint of understanding, she added, "a form of tuberculous. More specifically, a tuberculous lymphadenitis. Only this one seems to be about twenty times more severe, in-

finitely more contagious, and hits more in the throat and lungs."

"Can we fight it?"

"Well, if it were just scrofula, then all we would need to do is identify the precise type of bacterium and infection. REally strong and directed treatment with antibiotics is effective in upwards of ninety-five percent of people. My guess is that this one had been mutated by someone who wants to do nasty things with it. They've done a wonderful job of disguising it. You can't expect a hospital to have the sort of micro-viewing capabilities we have. By the time anyone might come close to a solution, the patient would be dead."

"A weapon?"

She sighed. "I'm afraid it looks like that."

She was interrupted by her phone ringing. "Yes," she answered. "Oh! Let me put this on speakerphone." She punched a button.

"Go ahead, David. What were you saying?"

"Well, I found out that agent Ames was there. I know him from a few years back. Uh—" he hesitated.

Harlan cut in, "It's okay, David. Anne knows all about my Secret Service days. What did you want to tell us?"

"I can't be sure, but I think I have seen Brian Sykes before, or at least his face in a file. If he's who I think, he use to work for a special military lab doing all sorts of nasty bio warfare work. As soon as I heard from Anne that the blood samples had extra DNA inside it all sort of came together."

"Is Sykes back?"

"No. And I'm pretty sure he won't be. All of the files he had in his office are missing. Allie and I are just sitting here with

nothing to do. There's one other thing. Yesterday we were talking and he mentioned something about 'the facility.' When I asked what he meant, he turned red and then made up something about calling his last hospital that. Should I call agent Narz?"

"Yes," Harlan told him. "Call Narz and tell him of your suspicions. Have him put out an international call for the arrest of Brian Sykes. We'll get back to doing the research—" He stopped when Anne held up a hand.

"David," she said. "I'm resending you a picture of the DNA. Can you and Allie please devote every waking minute to identifying it? I'm fairly certain it is a form of scrofula, but you've seen all the deadly symptoms that come with it. Verify it for me, and please hurry!"

Three hours later David called back. "We have it, Anne. Harlan. It's a mix of scrofula and pneumonia. One side of the helix is scrofula and the other is nosocomial pneumonia. Together, they are insidious."

Anne agreed. "One disguises the symptoms of the other until it is too late. And, one type of antibiotics than might reduce the problems with one would be ineffective on the other, or the combination of them. Do you have an idea of the drug combination we should be taking?"

He didn't and apologized.

Anne and Harlan in the Shopton lab and David and Allie in Iowa all set to work to try to devise a drug cocktail to save their lives.

Friday came and went, as did Saturday. Anne woke cramped and sitting at her desk on Sunday morning. The cough had kept them both up most of the night. Harlan had opted to go into one of the isolation rooms the past two nights, saying,

"Can't be much worse. At least Pete and Arnie can keep me company."

Anne looked at the clock. In just nine hours Sandy and Tom would be arriving home, expecting their mother to be there fixing their dinner. She was so tired and so distraught that she broke down into tears.

She was pulled out of her self-pity by a knock on the door.

It opened and Quimby Narz poked his head into the lab. "Hi, Anne. Got someone to see you." With that he yanked another man into the room.

"Brian Sykes!" Anne exclaimed.

"Yeah. Caught him trying to go over the border into Canada. Had a nice French passport in another name and all. In the past couple hours we have been able to discover that he stone-walled all of the research I wanted the Iowa team to do for you. Walked in and out in the middle of the night with all the files. The only thing he won't tell us is what all this is."

Harlan had walked into the room half way through Quimby's information. "I've got a great idea, Narz." With that, Ames grabbed the scruff of the neck of Brian Sykes and dragged him out of the room and down the hall.

Opening the isolation control room door, he shoved the man through. Closing the door behind them, he turned on all the lights. Both of their patients squinted against the sudden bright light.

Holding onto Sykes with one very strong hand, Harlan hit the button on the main control desk that unlocked the isolation room doors. He motioned Pete and Arnie to come out.

Arnie was first, and the result was immediate. Letting out a scream of terror, Brian Sykes tried to scramble out of Harlan's grip, and was rewarded with a right cross to the jaw.

“Oh, my god!” Arnie said. It was as if everything was coming back to him at once. “That’s one of the doctors from the facility. That’s the one who was talking about the infection.” He looked right at Harlan. “Did you know that they turned me into a human bomb?”

His story poured out. Harlan had turned on the intercom system so that Anne and Quimby could hear everything. Sykes was a military contractor who was working on developing an infection that could be “installed” in a healthy person—who would never show signs of the disease he carried—who could then be secreted into an opposing military force or even a foreign city where he would infect everyone he came within about thirty feet of. All that was required was that they breathed the same air.

Grabbing up Sykes, Harlan growled, “What’s the cure?”

Sykes refused to talk. So, Harlan dropped him and went over to speak softly with Arnie. Arnie smiled.

Arnie walked over to Sykes.

He bent down, and Sykes tried to scoot back away from him. But, Arnie was quicker. He grabbed the man’s shirt and pulled him close.

Then, Arnie kissed Brian Sykes. He finished by breathing a loud gasp of breath in the man’s face.

“So,, now perhaps you’ll tell these nice people how to cure this? You know? So you won’t die, too?”

An hour later Sykes had given them all the information they required. Anne prepared a combination of injected and oral antibiotics that she first gave to Harlan and herself.

Next, she gave the drugs to Pete and Arnie. Arnie also received a strong anti-viral that Sykes assured them would render him harmless.

“We were about to give it to him, but he escaped. By the time we found him he had been hospitalized in Seattle. Fortunately he walked out and into our arms. We got him as far as Boston, drugged so he wouldn’t remember anything, when he got away from us. You know the rest,” he said as Anne was giving Narz his drugs.

“Alright. Now, give me the drugs,” he pleaded.

Anne moved forward but Quimby placed a hand on her arm, stopping her.

“First, tell me why?”

“We need to have new weapons to fight people and fanatical groups that can’t be gotten to with conventional bullets and bombs. We have to experiment so we’ll be ready for the day we need them.”

Arnie faced the prisoner. “But, why me?”

“Why not? You were just some bum we found on the streets of Boston. You’re a nobody.”

He might have said more, but Arnie hit him so hard that he hit the floor, unconscious.

“And, that is that,” said Anne as she took off her lab coat and prepared to go home to fix dinner for her children.

FROM THE SAME AUTHOR

Coming Soon...

