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THE ANNE SWIFT INVESTIGATES SERIES

Anne Swift: Molecular Biologist Detective

The Deadly Dino DNA

By T. Edward Fox

Anne Swift has a really big problem dumped in her lap. Workers dredging part of Lake Carlopa for a new marina have uncovered a cache of dinosaur bones. A truly new and exciting find until the workers begin to get sick, some of them dying.

To add to her problems, someone she knows and works with is heavily affected when his daughter, one of the paleontologists called to study the bones, falls into a deep coma.

He has been assigned to assist her in this investigation, only he doesn't realize that he is familiar with one of its victims. Anne is torn between wanting to find the solution and her feelings as a woman. Should she tell Wiley Oswaldt or should she just keep him working? Will they ever be able to work together if he finds out she has been keeping it from him?

And, can they figure out what is killing people before it is too late?

This book is dedicated to people who dig up strange and interesting stuff. You never know what you will find. You don't even know if you will find anything, yet you keep at it. Keep at it, guys. Your perseverance keeps us in the know about what happened all those millennia ago.

THE ANNE SWIFT INVESTIGATES SERIES

Anne Swift and the Deadly Dino DNA

FOREWORD

Anne Swift has been in a few difficult situations before. Her own life has been on the line more than once—that she can tell me about—and even her family has never really known the extent to which she has been in jeopardy.

She has never been placed in the position of keeping a deadly secret from a dear and trusted coworker—one that can ruin their relationship if and when revealed.

I've only met Wiley Oswaldt once and only in passing. He seems to be a wonderful man and caring father. I can't imagine how I might feel were I in his place when all this happened.

And, I can't imagine how Anne felt, either. She won't talk about it much. She is sort of like some Viet Nam or Iraq War veterans who came back with deep, dark feeling tucked so far inside that some of them were consumed from within. Anne managed to get through this one, but the scars are there if you know were to look.

Victor Appleton II

CHAPTER 1 /

50 FEET DOWN, AND WE'VE HIT SOMETHING

THERE WERE three things guaranteed to get Anne Swift's heart pounding. The first two involved either very good or very bad news where it concerned her family.

The third was whenever she received one of 'those' phone calls. The ones that came from Agent Quimby Narz, her contact at the FBI. Narz had approached Anne a few weeks after her son, Tom Swift—the world famous inventor—had turned eight.

She had agreed to meet with him to discuss what he termed 'a very special request from the President.' Intrigued, she met him at a small diner in the nearby town of Thessaly, New York. What he told her made her heart beat fast and her mind race.

Before meeting her husband, Damon Swift—equally renown to his son and the head of Swift Enterprises—and during their courtship, Anne had gained both a graduate degree in microbiology as well as an advanced degree in molecular biology. And, though she had only worked in her field a couple years before she and Damon started their family—and she began devoting her life to them—she had become one of the most respected scientists in her field.

That is what brought Agent Narz to her.

"Anne," he had told her years earlier, "your country is in a desperate fix. We need people like you. Heck. We need *you!* There are some nasty natural and even nastier man-

made microbes and the like out there. Some are even being developed as weapons; weapons that might one day be used against the United States.”

“How can a housewife from Shopton be of any help, sir?” she had innocently asked.

It had taken Agent Narz more than two years to convince her, but Anne finally agreed to become an as-needed scientist for hire. There were just two stipulations that came with the job:

- 1) Nobody, not even her husband, could be told about her top secret double life, and;
- 2) She could only refuse to take on certain classifications of projects—ones that were not life-and-death situations, and only a couple per year.

Now, as she sat in her kitchen looking at the telephone that had just rung, she had an almost overwhelming premonition that it would be Quimby Narz asking her to come in to save the world, yet again.

Most of the family had just returned from a trip to San Francisco. Only her son, Tom, had remained at home. She sighed as something told her that all that relaxation and enjoyment and freedom from stress was about to get wrenched from her.

Checking the Caller ID confirmed her suspicion. It was a code name she recognized immediately. She picked the receiver up, saying, “Superwoman, here. To what do I owe the honor, Quimby?”

“Come down to the bank, Anne. Your back yard is on fire.” With that, the line went dead.

Narz watches too many spy movies, Anne thought to herself. All of his code words and secret handshakes are getting annoying. I wonder what he wants now?

She wrote a quick note letting her family know that she taking a “clear my mind” drive and would be back in time to prepare dinner, picked up her purse and cell phone, and left the house.

Where assignments had been difficult to manage when the children were younger, now that Tom was nineteen and his sister, Sandy, was eighteen, they could be relied on to take care of themselves on the days she needed to ‘clear her head.’

The bank Narz mentioned was the Shopton Merchants & Co. bank, a small branch that had first opened its doors a week after Anne had agreed to take on Government assignments. A respectable, working bank up front, it had a much larger facility behind and below its massive vault: a fully-equipped series of laboratories, research rooms, fantastic equipment and scientists, all coming and going at various times, working on other secret projects.

Anne entered the bank fifteen minutes later and walked over to a desk where she signed in to access her deposit box. The petite blond who took her into the vault closed the outer door behind them and, without a word, pulled a nondescript box, little larger than a box of playing cards, from her suit pocket. She watched as Anne placed her right thumb on a black square. A blue light lit and the blonde put the box away. She next watched Anne insert a very special key into a specific box. Nodding at the fact that an alarm had not sounded, the girl inserted her own key and turned it. Removing it, she quickly left the vault.

A previously indiscernible door silently slid aside at the back of the room. Anne stepped inside and was soon going through the initial decontamination that everyone entering the facility had to undergo.

Five minutes later, and now provided with a small key card access badge—usable only for the duration of the current assignment—Anne walked down the hallway and into her lab.

Quimby Narz, looking only slightly older than the last time she had seen him nine months earlier, sat on a stool. He rose and shook her hand.

“Glad you could come, Anne.”

“Hello, Quimby. You’ve got a little gray hair peeking out around your ears, I see. So, what’s going on?”

He reached over to a table and picked up a copy of *The Shopton Bulletin*. He passed it to her. “This,” he said.

Anne looked first at the main headline and then the publishing date. “Yes,” she said. “This was big news three months ago when they made the first discovery. When we left for California a couple weeks ago they had managed to haul up just a few small fragments. What makes it news today, or am I looking at the wrong story?”

The story had been sensational news when it first hit. A team of workers dredging out an area on the edge of Lake Carlopa to expand the Shopton Yacht Club’s marina had uncovered a nasal arch and a few toe bones representing two different species of dinosaur. Digging had stopped while archeologist were called in to study the site and the entire area had been cordoned off with a twenty-foot-tall canvas-wrapped fence.

He gave her a rueful grin. “Since then they have been pulling out and shipping off a lot of other bones. That much is public knowledge. What the news hasn’t been privy to, ostensibly to keep archeological bandits from inundating this area, is the actual amazing number of dinosaur bones that have been found and secretly recovered. Everything from almost complete skeletons of several large saurian species down to individual bones of at least two-dozen smaller species. All in all, more than thirty different dinosaur types seem to be represented by enough bones to tell the experts that at least fifty individual reptilian beasts were been buried in that small area.”

“So, that should be the end of the story. Bones found—bones recovered—bones safely in the hands of whomever it is that does things with old bones. Right?”

“No. That’s the cover story that will be released tomorrow, Anne,” Narz assured her. “It’s true to a point but it isn’t the end of the story. And, unfortunately, this is a story that seems to have taken a deadly turn and may get worse.”

He suddenly had Anne’s full attention.

“All of the bones they pulled out of the mud and the ooze happened close to a full month back and have gone to various universities and agencies for cleaning, classification and possible display. That should have been that. Here’s the problem. Last week, as another crew was pounding in the steel pilings that will form the breakwater for the marina, a huge underground air pocket got punctured.”

“Oh. I heard something about that on the TV. They said

lots of air but no explosive gasses came out. But, you're going to tell me that there was more than air that bubbled up, right?"

"Hmmm. Yeah. I am." He paused a moment, collecting his thoughts. "They figured that the air pocket must have been about a hundred thousand cubic feet. Which, I have been informed, isn't all that large. Once water poured back in, it only lowered the lake's level by a fraction of an inch."

Anne nodded doing the mental math. "That would be something like a cavern fifty by fifty by forty feet."

Narz agreed. "Anyway, a day later after all that gas—and I hear it was rather putrid smelling—came up, so did another cache of very large bones. Bigger than any of the others."

"How large?"

"Bigger than any dinosaur bones ever discovered. Evidently, the thighbones indicate a monstrosity of more than half again as large as the biggest specimen to date. Something in the range of what I heard was known as the Ultrasaurus. Could have been as heavy as two hundred tons."

"That's quite a find," Anne had to admit. "But, surely you can't want me in here to study it."

"No. But the unanticipated thing that came with this discovery is that something in those giant bones seems to be making the scientists who have been cleaning them up, sick—really sick. As in, we may begin losing some of them in a very short time unless we can find an answer. Hell. We don't even know if we could incinerate the things to

get rid of them without unleashing havoc."

"What has happened to these new bones?" Anne inquired.

"We've secreted them in a special storage facility down in Virginia for the time being. Packed all of them up in heavy plastic tarps then spray sealed them in a cocoon of silicone gel and then gave them an outer wrap of air-tight polycarbonate. The vault is hermetically sealed and everyone handling the things were in class one clean suits with built-in air supplies. So far, they are all okay. It's just the folks we gave the first of the giant bones to initially we have to worry about."

"How many people?"

"With support staff, probably in the neighborhood of eighty to ninety."

Narz looked particularly miserable. Anne detected the palpable weight of responsibility sitting in his shoulders.

"Do we have anything here at the lab, yet?"

"Be in tomorrow. The last of everything was being confiscated—uh, collected as of yesterday and taken to Virginia, with the exception of five bones that are coming here. They are the ones from the first group sent out for cleaning that caused their handlers to become sick."

Anne thought for a moment, then added, "We're only assuming that they are the source of the illness. Right?"

He agreed with a quick nod.

"Alright then. I'll get things ready today and come back tomorrow after everyone's out of the house."

She was about to turn away when she realized that there was something else on the agent's mind. "Penny for them, Quimby."

"Not much to tell, actually." He shrugged. "I'm just very worried about this. The broader implication is that everyone in the Shopton area was exposed to the fetid air that came up, and the water in that area of the lake has probably been contaminated by contact with the bones. This could be much larger than we can handle, Anne. Much larger."

All she could do was look at him as the blood drained out of her face.

He left the lab promising that she would have her sample bones in the examination chamber by the time she arrived the following morning.

It took less than an hour for her to get things ready. Since decontamination was automatically handled, the heavy glass fronted chamber at the rear of her lab was always kept perfectly sterile. The bones would be sequestered in separate sealed containers in another sealed chamber below her lab. There would be no human contact with them.

She accessed her computer terminal and performed a few minutes of research on the FBI's secure data server regarding the actual cache of bones and how they had been handled. It was shocking to find the cavalier attitude taken with the bones. Literally hundreds of people had either touched or been in close proximity to the bones during the fifteen days it had taken to excavate them all. Simple plastic tarps had been used to protect them from sun damage and water from the lake had been sprayed

over them constantly to keep them fully hydrated. That water had, of course, simply been allowed to run off and be pumped right back into Lake Carlopa.

She shook her head in sad wonder about how foolish everyone had been. Of course, she had to consider this all in hindsight. From what she read there had been no indication these bones had been anything other than an amazing archeological find. They had been handled just as hundreds of other such discoveries were handled all over the world.

Now, there could be absolute hell to pay. Again, she reminded herself, assuming that the source of the illness *was* actually in the bones.

She checked out and went home.

Her daughter Sandy came breezing in just before five that afternoon. "Hey, Mother," she sang out giving Anne big hug around the neck. "Isn't life grand?"

Anne had to smile. Sandy was a brilliant but often dramatic girl. A total slave to her ever-changing hormones, Sandy could be ebullient one minute and then morose half an hour later.

Cautiously, she asked, "What's making today particularly wonderful, dear?"

"Bud is leaving work right this minute and is going to pick me up in ten minutes. We're going over to the lake for a swim and an evening picnic with three other couples."

Anne hoped that her face didn't reveal the blood-chilling fear that swept over her at this news. What could she do? She fought her fear while she struggled for a

concrete idea. Finally, she said, “But, Sandy. I overheard a couple of policemen talking about a problem down at the lake. I think it’s supposed to be hush-hush, but there is some sort of sewage leak that’s contaminating the water. By this time tomorrow the entire lake is going to be quarantined. I’d really prefer that all of you had your picnic elsewhere.”

She watched Sandy’s expression go from disbelief to disappointment to resignation. *I may have actually won this one*, she thought to herself.

“Sandy, dear,” she said before Sandy could find any words of argument, “since Bud hasn’t arrived yet, can you be a good girl and run down to the market to pick something up for me. Please? I’m making your father and brother a stir-fried dish but forgot to get any water chestnuts. Take my car and pick up a couple of those small cans. Okay?”

With a huge sigh, Sandy agreed.

“The keys and a five dollar bill are right inside my purse. Take those. If Bud gets here early I’ll tell him you’ll be right back. I can explain to him about the sewage.”

As Sandy left the house, shoulders drooping, Anne reached for her cell phone and dialed the number she knew would get her only an answering machine, but should provide fast results. When a small bell tone answered, she pressed a series of keys and spoke her message.

“Supergirl needs a really fast favor. Something for everyone, actually. Get the police to close down the lake immediately. Sewage spill of some sort. No swimming. No

boating. No going within, say, fifty feet of the water for at least five days. Bye!”

She set the phone down and stood back, waiting. In less than a minute it rang twice and then stopped.

She smiled. Quimby would take care of everything. She turned on the small television on the kitchen counter and went back to preparing dinner.

Bud arrived a minute behind the returning Sandy. As he came in and gave the girl a quick peck on the cheek, he asked, “Did you hear about the lake, Mrs. Swift?”

“Why, nothing specific, Bud. A little rumor I overheard is all. Why?”

“It’s all over the radio and probably the TV by now. Some old sewage pipe from last century ruptured. The lake is getting contaminated.” He turned to Sandy. “Sorry, Sandy, but we’ll have to have the picnic someplace else.”

She shrugged. “Yeah. I heard it on the radio on my way back from the store. Rats!”

Anne nodded her agreement, but she was secretly overjoyed. Quimby had saved the day!

“I know you can’t swim here, but you are welcome to use the back yard, you know,” Anne offered.

A few phone calls later and Sandy and Bud left to catch up with their friends at a small state park just outside of Shopton. It had its own lake—more of a pond—that was fed from a nearby spring and was always crystal clear if not just a bit on the cold side. Those hearty enough would still be able to swim.

When Anne arrived at the lab the following morning,

she was surprised to find a lack of anything inside of her sealed exam chamber.

She was pondering what to do next when her phone rang.

“Anne here,” she answered.

“Annie? It’s Wiley Oswaldt. Looks like we’ll be working together my girl. I’ll be in just after lunchtime. Don’t have too much fun without me!”

Wiley was one of Anne’s favorite co-workers at the secret lab. Easily twenty years her senior, he was a genius when it came to dividing samples and obtaining clean, clear DNA samples. His insight and skills had been invaluable to her at least a dozen times since they first were paired more than nine years earlier.

She was looking forward to seeing him again.

The phone rang a second time. “Anne,” she answered.

“It’s Quimby, Anne. I’m sure you’ve discovered that the bones didn’t arrive as promised. We’ve run into a little problem.”

Anne could imagine all sort of potential problems, but asked, “Specifically, what?”

“Specifically, two things. First, two of the workers involved in wrapping up and hoisting the bones out of the dig area have died. That’s bad enough, but now we have a little conflict of interest that came up in the middle of the night. I’ll be right down.”

The phone went dead. Anne sat down and pulled a book out of her purse. She had been reading an old favorite science fiction classic, H.G. Wells’ *The Invisible Man* and

knew that it would hold her attention until Agent Narz’s arrival.

Twenty minutes later the agent arrived. He looked harried and sported a day’s growth of beard.

“You look like crap, Quimby,” Anne commented.

“I’m not feeling so great right now, Anne. Pretty bad, in fact.”

Narz looked into Anne’s eyes. She could see the torment and sadness in them.

“What’s the dire news now,” she inquired in a soft voice.

Taking a deep breath, Narz told her. “One of the sickest of the bone scientists is Penny Oswaldt. *Wiley’s daughter!*”

CHAPTER 2 /

HOW TO KEEP THE SECRET

THERE WAS a moment of total silence as Anne strove to digest the information. Finally, she managed to catch the breath that had been startled out of her.

“Does Wiley know?”

“Not yet. Anne. I know you are a parent and I am not, however, I believe I can empathize with your thoughts right now.”

“It’s not me you should be thinking about or empathizing with. It’s Wiley. When are you going to tell him?” Her last words were practically barked out at the agent.

He held up a hand. “I’m sorry, Anne, but this comes from the highest level. Wiley Oswaldt is not to hear about this until we know just how bad things are. It is anticipated that his effectiveness to this agency will drop to nearly zero when he hears, and we need his one hundred percent effort right now. We just can’t afford to have him standing idly by her bedside—”

“Idly by? *Idly by?* What are you? Insane?”

“Anne. I know this isn’t sitting well with you, but this is an order to all of us from the top. And, I mean the absolute top.”

Anne was stunned. She didn’t even acknowledge when Narz said goodbye and departed.

An hour later she was still sitting in stunned silence

when Wiley walked into the lab.

“Morning, Annie,” he greeted her with a big smile. “Have we got anything new to go on?” He picked up a few pieces of mail from his desk and was looking through them.

Fighting an onslaught of tears, Anne cleared her throat and replied, “Nothing new on the bones, Wiley. They’ve been delayed. I’ve just been sitting here thinking about what to do next.” It was not a lie. She had been pondering whether to go against her orders and tell the gentle, older scientist the dire news.

“Fill me in on what you know, then.”

She took a breath and then started with what parts of the story she knew, then added things she had discovered with a little on-line research, and finally they shared a few conjectures.

“I know what I’ve heard on television and what little our Agent Narz was able to provide. I take it that nobody locally has been taken ill? If it is the bones causing the troubles it may be only when somebody had tried to take a core sampling. My daughter, Penny, works at one of the labs doing some of the cleaning. I might need to give her a call to see what she knows. Well, perhaps tomorrow once we get our first look.”

Anne’s throat was constricted with emotion. She told the older scientist that it would be necessary for her to be out of the lab for a couple hours. She gave him the excuse that she had to rush home to fix Sandy lunch.

Wiley was curious as it was a school day. *Wouldn’t Sandy be in school*, he considered. He shrugged and

turned back to his waiting mail.

Anne had to get away and think. She couldn't continue to face Wiley knowing that a deep secret was being kept from the man. She spent a full hour just walking around downtown Shopton. Finally she came to a decision. She headed back to the lab.

Wiley was not in her lab when she got back.

"Good," she said aloud.

Anne picked up the receiver of her phone and dialed the message number she knew would get her fast contact with Agent Narz.

"Yes, Anne," he said when her phone rang thirty seconds later.

Anne took a deep breath. "Quimby. I want you down here immediately! No questions... no delays. Get down here *right now!*"

With that, she hung up.

There were only a few things in life that riled Anne Swift and this situation was definitely becoming one of them.

When Narz arrived eight minutes later, she met him just inside of the secret entrance to the labs.

"Okay, Anne. What gives," he asked, trying to look cool and distracted while all the while giving Anne the impression of a nervous man who is preparing himself to hear that he has just been condemned to death.

"What right do you have sending out the order to keep Wiley Oswaldt in the dark about his daughter?" she demanded.

"Anne," he replied in a falsely calm voice. He wanted time to think of how to answer her, but she wasn't going to give it to him.

"Don't 'Anne' me! What can possibly be going on in that thick head of yours? Highest person be damned! Wiley's daughter is sick and may even die. She is directly involved in this whole mess and all you and your masters can think about is to try to keep him working. In the dark. What the hell is the matter with you?" She was now screaming at him.

Quimby Narz had never seen Anne Swift so angry. Her face was bright red and her fists were clenching and unclenching as she stood, waiting for his answer.

"Okay. I admit that this isn't the best thing we can do, but you have to understand..."

"I only have to understand that as a parent I want to know what's happening with my family all the time, good or bad, Quimby. No matter what. What are you thinking?"

"Anne. Wiley Oswaldt is one of our best, just like you. But, his psych profile says that he is prone to slowing down whenever something personal or family-related is injected into the mix."

Anne could scarcely believe what she was hearing. "So, you would threaten any future project, even this one if he finds out you've been purposely lying to him, just so that you can get a little more from him right now? Is that it? Because if it is, then consider my resignation in your hand right here and right now!"

Inwardly, Anne was much calmer than she appeared to

Narz, and her words were having the sort of effect on him she hoped they would. At the mention of ‘resignation,’ he looked as if he had been slapped. He turned ghostly white and beads of perspiration were popping up on his upper lip and forehead.

Narz turned and reached out to steady himself on a chair against the wall, then sank into it, looking up at Anne.

“You can’t meant that,” he squeaked out.

“I can and I do, *Agent Narz!*” she let the last words come out like gunfire.

“Bu—but—”

“No. No buts, Agent Narz. If you don’t tell Wiley immediately and then let *him* decide how to proceed with the knowledge—and my bet is that he will want to put an even greater effort into finding what this is and fixing it—then the only way you will get any more work out of me is to place me under arrest, chain me to my lab table and beat me into cooperation. Look me in the eyes, Narz. *I’m not bluffing!*”

He sagged. He couldn’t look her in the eyes. Anne refused to allow herself to feel any pity for the man.

After a few minutes Narz looked up. “Okay, Anne,” he said in a voice so soft she almost missed it. “You win. I’ll tell Dr. Oswaldt right now. He’s eating his lunch in the staff lounge.”

He pushed himself up and out of the chair and headed down the hallway. Anne took the elevator back to the main floor and let herself out through the secret back entrance. She would wait in the little bank employee

parking lot between buildings until Narz returned.

In five minutes he was standing in front of her. He was slightly shaking and looked shocked.

“Wiley wants you in the lab, Anne. I’m sorry I put you through this. Really I am.” He placed a hand on her right shoulder as he passed her.

Anne went around to the front and back through the bank. Six minutes later she was at the door to her lab. She took a deep breath and opened the door. Inside she found Wiley sitting on his favored perch, the edge of his desk. He looked up at the sound of her entrance.

“Hello, Annie. Pretty bad day I guess.” He sighed. “Thank you for making Mr. Narz tell me the truth. He said you were willing to resign over this.” He smiled ruefully at her. “I can’t say that that is much of an ongoing bargaining chip. You might have kept that one in your hip pocket.”

She was about to protest when he continued. “Now, don’t get me wrong. It *was* very effective.”

“What’s your decision about all this, Wiley?”

“I am going to devote as much time to tackling this and making certain that my Penny will survive as I possibly can. I couldn’t have it any other way.”

Anne crossed the room and gave the large man a big hug. He patted her on the back and murmured a comforting, “It’s okay.”

She was about to say something when a signal light began flashing in the lab, the sign that something was on its way up and into the examination chamber.

When it arrived two minutes later, the pair of scientists were standing like little kids with their noses practically pressed up against the glass separating them from the deadly thigh bone now sitting on the table.

The first thing they could see was that the bone, rather than being dirty or gray or even white, was a fairly noticeable pale yellow in color.

“That certainly isn’t right,” Oswaldt murmured.

Anne agreed. “No, It isn’t. Okay. What can I harvest for you?”

He requested five coring samples: one from each end and three from various points in the middle of the seven-foot-long femur.

She also used a microtome to get several dozen ultra-thin slices of the bone including a full cross section that required the bone be cut in half.

“Sorry, archeologist. Necessity,” she said as the automatic saw severed the upper ball portion from the shaft.

While Wiley prepared each sample for the genetic and DNA tests he would perform later that afternoon, Anne inserted sample after sample into the scanning electron microscope.

It was difficult work because everything had to be done in the sealed chamber or in specially sealed pods that could be moved to various stations in the lab.

By the time Anne needed to leave that day, neither had any news for the other.

“I’ve got what appear to be very typical bone cells here,”

she told her partner. “The marrow is all but gone but I did manage to get a small scraping near the knuckle. Looks like reptilian blood and tissue.” She gave a rueful chuckle. “I can’t imagine I was expecting anything else.”

“And, I have just begun getting what appears to be the standard types of degraded DNA that you see with these old bones. In other words, not a lot so far.”

“I’m not seeing anything of great note myself,” Anne had to admit. “Perhaps we’re going about this the wrong way. Maybe we need to bring in one of the...” Words failed her as she thought of Wiley’s plight.

“Perhaps,” he told her, finishing her sentence. “Just perhaps we ought to have Penny here. She may hold the key. And—” he looked at Anne with tears welling up in his large brown eyes, “I would very much like to have my little girl here. Between us, we *can* save her!”

“Yes,” Anne declared. “We can and we will. What would you say to another scientist in here to give us a better understanding of reptiles than we two have?”

With his almost-usual pixieness, Wiley replied, “I’d say, ‘Hello there, Mr. Reptile Scientist.’” He gave her a little shrug. “It is like a disease. I can’t help myself even at a time like this.”

Anne had to smile. She walked over to him and rested her head on his shoulder. “I think I’d say that as well,” she told him. “Shall I have Quimby order us one?”

“I think so.”

Before she left for the day she placed the call. Narz seemed very relieved that Anne wasn’t shouting at him anymore and promised to have Oswaldt’s daughter

transferred under quarantine to the lab and to have a young man he believed would be the best bet for a reptile genetics expert. “He’s a fully qualified paleontologist as well as being an expert in modern reptiles He’s even hosted a television program in England on dinosaurs.”

When she returned the following morning at eight, Wiley Oswaldt was standing in the room next to the lab gazing into a glass-fronted cubicle, the room Anne remembered from the time when they worked with a man who had a deadly respiratory disease; deadly to others but not to him.

Penny Oswaldt lay in her bed looking gray, drawn and barely human. Her face was twisted in obvious pain even though she appeared to be unconscious. She and the bed were in a sealed quarantine suite, two different IV lines snaking down and into her arms.

Wiley looked around. “She’s getting fluids and a liquid nourishment of some sort. They got her here around three this morning. I was sleeping next door and they were kind enough to come get me. And, before you have the chance to say it, I know that I look like something the cat dragged in. In truth, I feel like something the cat coughed up.”

Anne gave the older man a little hug. “Can I fix you anything from our little freezer of delights?” The staff lounge always came with a full-stocked freezer of prepared meals ranging from standard meatloaf-type meals to more exotic curries and even heat-and-serve steaks.

“I had a burrito an hour ago. It was as disgusting as I imagined. Give me ten minutes to take a quick shower

and I will show you what I came up with.” He blew his daughter a kiss and then turned away.

Anne left the room and went into the lab where she reviewed her microscope findings until he returned.

When he did, he brought two steaming cups of coffee. Setting one in front of Anne, he pulled up his stool. “I decided to untangle some DNA strands, Annie. Did you know that the DNA in mammals is almost twice as large as that of these old thunder lizards? No? Neither did I. But I found them to be about fifty-six percent the size of human and other DNA we typically run into. It made the job a misery. I just completed detangling a complete strand when they brought Penny in.”

He pointed at the electron microscope.

“Might we use your magic picture box to see what we have?”

He reached back to his desk and picked up a small case. Opening it he extracted a tiny vial. In it, and almost invisible to Anne’s eyes, was a sliver of something.

She placed the sealed vial in a chamber, sealed the small doorway and used the small mechanical “Waldo” hands inside to pick up a sterile pair of miniature tweezers, and then opened the vial. It took two tries but she extracted and laid down the line of DNA on a sample slide. She first placed it into the video-microscope she like using before destroying something in the electron scope. Made by her husband’s company and developed in part by her son, it was a combination of an extremely powerful traditional microscope attached to a high definition camera and a sophisticated computer enhancement system. It could provide a look somewhere

in between the power of the electron scope and a powerful old glass lens scope.

They both looked at the screen as she set the focus. Like most DNA strings, pairs of genes were connected across while the entire set was connected, and replicated, from top to bottom.

As they sat looking at the picture, the door opened behind them.

“Hello,” the man standing in the doorway said to them. “Agent Narz asked me to drop by. My name is Nigel Drake.” He had an unmistakably English accent.

“Welcome to our little chamber of horrors,” Wiley said standing up to shake the man’s hand. “They tell us that you’re some sort of TV host. I’m hoping—and I’ll tell you this in case Narz didn’t... my daughter’s life is at stake here—that being on the idiot tube is just a little sideline for you and that you are really an expert on reptiles.”

Walking over to shake Anne’s hand, Nigel replied, “I have three doctorates, the first garnered at the age of twenty. I am an expert in paleontology, a Doctor of Herpetology, and I am a general physician specializing in toxicity. The television gig came about when someone discovered that I also had straight teeth and could work without what I believe you call cue cards.”

“Forgive us if we seem a little, well, standoffish...” Anne said. “We’re a bit over the top of being stressed right now. Uh, can we call you Nigel or do you prefer Doctor Drake?”

“Coworkers call me Doctor, acquaintances call me Nigel and friends call me Nige. Nige will be just fine. And, as far as whether I actually am qualified or not, I must tell you

that I am immediately worried about something.”

“What?” Anne asked.

“That,” he replied pointing over her shoulder and at the screen. “There is no way on the Earth or in even Dante’s version of Hell that you should ever have three genes connected side by side like that. That is precisely the sort of mutation that gives me nightmares!”

CHAPTER 3 /**DECODING THE DISASTER**

ANNE AND WILEY looked at the spot Nigel Drake was pointing. It was near the end of the string of genes and they had not had the time to get to that point before Drake entered the lab.

“Oh, dear,” Anne exclaimed seeing exactly what he meant. She sat down at the controls and soon had the gene triplet in the center of the screen and at top magnification. She explained how they had just begun looking at the sample when he arrived.

“Where was that sample harvested?” Anne asked.

Wiley said, after looking at his notes, “That was from site number three on the central shaft. The lowest one,” he added for Nigel’s benefit, pointing at the position on the actual bone inside the sealed chamber.

“Okay. I would suppose that before we continue you ought to show me around here. I don’t want to stumble about getting in the way of your work.”

Between them, Anne and Wiley Oswaldt gave Nigel Drake a tour of the entire facility. While Wiley looked in on his daughter Anne offered the Englishman a cup of tea.

“I hate to be a total disappointment, Anne, but I have never taken to the stuff. Give me coffee and the stronger the better, since tea is just bitter brown water to me. I refuse to put sugar and milk in anything other than breakfast cereal. It probably isn’t worth taking any more

time here over my beverage preferences, but have you every tasted double-brewed coffee?”

When Anne asked if that was just made with extra coffee grounds, he told her, “No. And, yes. You make a pot of coffee. Standard stuff. Then, you cool it in the fridge, return the coffee to the machine with all new grounds and brew again. It is marvelous and rich and assails the nostrils with steamy, caffeinated goodness. And,” he looked at her in an almost conspiratorial way, “once you get known for making it, only the strongest and the brave come along and steal it from you!”

They returned to the lab in time to meet up with Agent Narz. “Ah. I see Doctor Drake has arrived. You should give him a little tour before you all get into this,” he suggested.

“Done,” Drake told him.

“Oh, well then you will probably want to get started trying to identify the problem.”

“Also done. To some extent,” Drake said with a little wink at Anne.

Wiley came back in at that moment. “She’s still sleeping and the equipment says it is just sleep and not a coma. For now. I’ve set things up to double the antibiotics.”

“What do you mean you’ve already identified the problem,” Narz demanded.

Anne spoke up. “Look at the screen, Quimby.” She walked over and pointed right at the gene triplet. “See anything odd?”

Cautiously, he said, “I’m guessing that because you’re

pointing at three of whatever those are in the middle there, and everything else seems to be in twos, that might be the problem?”

“It is certainly a very nasty anomaly indeed, Agent Narz. Back in England I have only seen one other instance and that was in a laboratory experiment. A geneticist spliced three genes—by the way, those things as you call them are genes and are supposed to only be found alone in a few rare instances or in pairs—anyway, he spliced a new gene into a type of wheat. It was supposed to be a gene that would make the grain insect resistant. GM, that’s genetic modification, is rampant in the food industry there. A lot of it is very good. Tomatoes that turn red and remain that way for weeks rather than being harvested green and chemically induced to ripen. That sort of thing. Anyway, as I was saying. The third gene was spliced just as you see that one. In the middle.”

“What happened?”

“The grain was propagated and then reproduced in abundance enough to plant four hectares—that would be about ten of your American acres I believe. Before you ask, it grew. Very well. Too well. The grain heads were almost triple the size of their progenitors. So large in fact that the grain all fell over from both the added weight and the fact that the stalks were only about half as thick as normal. Then,” he paused, mostly for effect Anne thought, “they fed some of the grain to mice. The results were not immediate. It took about two days before they all died.”

Narz gulped. “And that might be a dinosaur equivalent to the grain problem?”

Anne, Wiley and Nigel all nodded.

Narz gulped again. “I had better leave you to it then,” he said as he backed up toward the door.

“Don’t eat any strange bread,” Wiley called after him and the door began to close. Turning to their visitor he asked, “Do you believe we might have that sort of reaction here? Surely none of the ill people would have attempted to eat any of the bones. That really leaves either contact with skin or inhalation.”

“My vote would be inhalation,” Drake told them. “It would be consistent with the way these fossils seem to get handled. Lots of nitrile and rubber gloves and not many respiratory masks. I understand that your daughter is very ill, Wiley, but do you think she might be able to assist us by telling us what she did when working on the bones?”

“I’m not a physician and the one assigned to her will not be in for another hour, but she’s in no condition to talk.”

“A pity. Both her current state and what such information she might impart could mean to our search. So, are there any others we might speak with that are not as far along with whatever this is?”

When they couldn’t answer that, Anne suggested calling their handler. “Quimby,” she left on the message machine, “I know you just left but we need some direct answers from anyone who has handled the bones, but is less sick than Penny Oswaldt. The sooner the better—right now in fact.” She hung up.

Five minutes later the phone rang and a woman’s voice told them, “Agent Narz has requested that I patch you to

Bethesda. I'm working to connect you to a Dr. Elizabeth Grado. Hold for two minutes, please," and with that she was gone. Anne pressed the button to put the call on the speaker phone and filled them in on the curious beginnings. When the caller returned, she announced that it would be another five to ten minutes and they needed to continue holding. Then, as before, she was gone.

With no on-hold music they could only assume that the call was still connected.

Wiley was starting to harvest and unravel another DNA strand, Anne was preparing their current sample for the electron microscope and Nigel was staring raptly at the picture of the gene on Anne's screen when the call finally went through.

A gruff, woman's voice said, "I'm not certain who the hell you are out there, and I don't like being ordered around where one of my patients is concerned, but I have been told that you absolutely have to speak with Dr. Grado. I want your assurance that if she begins to have problems that you will not bitch and moan when I cut you off. Understood?"

"Is that the dulcet tones of Dr. Gladys Buckingham I hear," Nigel asked as he stepped closer to the phone.

"Oh, criminy geez. Is that you, Nigel?" When he admitted it was she said, "Okay. If you're involved this must be pretty important. I won't ask. Just understand that the doctor is quite ill and we don't have an idea in H-E double hockey sticks what it is."

"That, dear woman, is what we are working upon. Once

this is concluded I will pop over and we will have a splendid lunch."

As the phone was being handed to the patient he whispered, "Old friend of many years."

A weak and hoarse voice came on the line. "Hello? Who is this?"

"My name is Dr. Nigel Drake and I am investigating the reason you are so ill," he told her. "We have several theories and need to narrow them down. If we can ask you a few questions it will be of enormous assistance."

She coughed and then practically sighed, "Okay. Shoot."

"First, were you directly handling the bones from the Upstate New York find?"

"Yes."

"Did you handle both large or small examples?"

"Both." She coughed again.

"Did you take any core samples or scrapings?"

She hesitated before answering. "I wasn't supposed to, but yeah. Took a small scraping from the inside of one cracked rib."

"Were you wearing gloves and a respirator?"

"Gloves and a paper mask. Why? What's wrong with me?"

"In a moment. Finally, did you touch any part of any bone with bare skin. Even a brief contact."

"Uhhhh, I'm pretty sure I didn't. Long sleeves and nitrile gloves."

“Okay, now I will tell you what we know. You have been exposed to what may be an inhaled toxin in those bones. We have not yet identified it, but I am going to suggest a few things to your doctor. Please rest well, and rest assured that the best minds in the country are on this. And, please let me speak with the good doctor. Thank you so much.”

The phone was moved away and obviously dropped in the exchange, but Dr. Buckingham came back on. “So? Give me some hope, Nige.”

“The ‘so’ of it is that our first thoughts, and believe me Gladys, they are thoughts only, are that this is inhaled. Have you given steroids?”

“Not yet. Just antibiotics. Should we be pushing corticosteroids?”

“We have no proof but I’m willing to let you help test things that should be benign. I’m thinking Betanethasone intramuscular but at eight hour intervals, not daily. At least for one full day. Plus, add an inhaled steroid. Probably, oh, Budesonide or even Flunisolide every six hours. I’ll call you at this time tomorrow or you can call my cell any time. Ta!” He hung up before the other doctor could ask questions he wasn’t ready—none of them were—to answer.

“I am a cold-hearted bastard,” he told Anne and Wiley. “I have no idea if they will work and no right to have her patient medicated in such a cavalier manner. I only have intuition and this little start we have on the possible cause. But, and I stress this, we have to begin with something.”

Wiley Oswaldt cleared his throat before asking, “Why can’t we give my Penny something like those? She’s right here and we can observe her for immediate reactions...”

“Dr. Oswaldt... Wiley. As I said, I am cold-hearted. If the young woman in Maryland does not show positive results—or worse—I will be able to shrug and move on with my life. I have never met her nor am I likely to. However, if I were to give your daughter something that proved less than beneficial—or worse—I would not be able to either look you in the eye or continue to work with you.” His voice softened. “Your daughter’s condition appears to be about stabilized for the time being. Certainly she is showing no signs that another twenty-four hours in an unachievable goal.”

Anne spoke up. “As the supposed head of this team I have to make the hard decisions. And here goes. Nigel is correct. And, he is cold-hearted about it. We have both been in this situation before, Wiley. It’s just that this is the first time we have a family connection to one of the victims. Even when I got sick with that respiratory disease it was *me* and not my family. We are now going to begin digging into that gene, do some experiments where we, regrettably, will need to infect some lab mice, and we might come up with something. Also, Nigel’s friend and her patient may give us some positive results. Even measurable negative ones may help point us in a better direction. So, let’s all take a deep breath, and jump on this!”

Without looking to see if either of the men had an objection, Anne turned to the business of finally getting the gene sample into the electron microscope.

Nigel made a phone call and ordered three dozen white mice while Wiley went back to detangling DNA strands.

In less than an hour he had eleven strands sitting on slides, taken from each of the sampling sites. Under Anne's video microscope they all appeared to be the same. In each case the thirty-nine pairs were what they assumed to be "normal" for the first nineteen pairs, it was only at the point where what should have been pair twenty became a triplet that things looked wrong.

"Well," Nigel said looking at the fifth of the slides, "discounting the extra gene, it is now obvious that we have a constant seventy-eight chromosomal set. That definitely puts this beast in the middle of today's avians. But to have the odd number instead of an even one..." He left the rest unspoken as he returned to the slides.

Anne asked Wiley for permission to take blood, mucus and a tissue sample from his daughter.

"She'll never feel it, Annie. Go ahead."

She walked next door and began the process of using the set of Waldoes inside the quarantine cubicle. As each sample was taken it was labeled and placed on a tray that would be delivered to the exam chamber in the lab.

Before heading back she detoured to the lounge where she discovered that someone had left an almost full pot of coffee sitting on the counter. Feeling it told her that it was room temperature. On a whim—and she felt that a whim was required about now—she poured it into the coffee machine, put in a new filter and coffee grounds and pressed the BREW button.

She returned to the lab ten minutes later with three

cups of what she told Wiley was "Nigel coffee." Drake smiled and took his in both hands, giving it a deep smell.

"Oh, yes, Anne. Thank you. I will be consuming about three pots of this in the next twenty-four hours. Excellent start."

She had to admit after taking a tentative sip that he was right. Although strong, it was nowhere as bitter as she believed it might be.

A small buzzer sounded and the samples she had taken next door arrived in the chamber. Anne maneuvered them into the appropriate pods and they disappeared through the floor only to pop up a minute later at both hers and Wiley's stations.

"You pull her DNA from those while I get cells under the scope," she told the older scientist. Her job was much easier and she had the first of the skin cells from Penny's mouth lining in the video microscope in under five minutes.

"Rats! Normal cell sludge to the naked eye," she said. Both of the men came over to look. Wiley returned to his stool as Nigel pointed to the screen and asked if she could separate the cell wall from everything else.

"It would be useful to fully examine that cell sac to see if there have been any changes. We might even run into something. Not certain what, but it might be there." He tapped the screen right on the cell in the center. "Those cells seem a bit large to me. Hmmm?"

Wiley's efforts to extract the DNA were successful and several strands were stretched out. "Thank the gods and the demons for that," he exclaimed. "No gene triplet there

and normal replication seems to be evident in the blood sample.”

He checked the second and the third strands and all came up looking normal.

“That,” Anne said with a small smile to them, “appears to say that this is not a mutating DNA. And, that takes away a whole slew of possibilities, some of them unsolvable.”

“Where do you believe that leads us?” Nigel asked. Instead of looking like he might already have the answer, something Anne had noticed earlier, he now appeared to be completely sincere and curious.

“That leads us to the point where we need to get more samples from more of the victims, I would say,” she answered. “And that requires another call to our favorite Quimby.”

“Before you do that, let me contact Gladys and see if she has anything good to report. It’s been six hours.” He pulled out his cell phone and hit the redial button. It took fifteen minutes and transfers to several wrong locations before she answered the page. “How is the patient?” he asked.

“Not as great as you might hope. *Dr. Grado died ten minutes ago!*”

CHAPTER 4 /

IS CLEANUP POSSIBLE THIS TIME?

HIS HAND dropped to his side and the phone clattered to the floor. Anne reached down and picked it up.

“Hello. This is Barbara Boone,” she told the doctor giving her FBI cover name. “I’m working with Nigel and he’s just gone into shock. Can I assume that the news of the young woman is bad?” She listened and then thanked the other woman. She was about to say goodbye when Nigel snapped out of whatever funk he had drifted into and grabbed the phone.

“Gladys. Important doesn’t begin to cover this. Tell me everything you can about how she reacted to the meds. I mean everything!”

Six minutes later he hung up. Turning to Wiley he said, “It is a very good thing we did not give your daughter the steroids. It made things drastically worse and in short order. They intubated her because her lungs shut down. We’ll replicate that in the mice when they get here but it appears that the strengthening properties of steroids make whatever this is strong enough to complete the job of killing its host.”

Anne finished placing the deflated cell membrane into the electron microscope. When she activated it and zeroed in on the cell sac, Wiley and Nigel both said, “That’s not right,” in unison.

“I’ll say,” Anne added. Rather than looking like an empty ball, it had the appearance of a balloon that had

been over inflated many months ago and then was recently emptied. The wall was puckered, withered, thin and wrinkly. *What, she thought, would do that? Have I seen this before?*

To the others she said, “We need to find out if this is a symptom or if this is what is actually making people sick. If it’s the former, then I believe I’ve seen this condition before and there may be a ready treatment for it. If it is the thing that is making them sick then we need to know if this is affecting the internal structure of the cells. Wiley, extract the contents of at least ten of Penny’s cells and put them on a slide with a little separation. I’m going to harvest some cells from my own mouth and we’ll do a side-by-side comparison.”

The mice arrived shortly after she did a scraping of her inner cheek. While Dr. Oswaldt continued performing the cell ablations she and Nigel separated the mice into eight groups.

He took it on to infect three groups with materials from the actual bones; one group had a few cells injected into them, one group were rubbed on their feet and noses with bone, and the third had a chunk of bone placed in their containment box so they would only inhale the air that it touched.

Two groups were given cells from Penny Oswaldt to see if the disease or condition was transmittable between living beings; one via injection and the other via casual contact. Two groups were given cells from Anne’s mouth cell samples in a similar manner to Penny’s, and the final group was left alone as the control.

It occurred to Anne that she still needed to contact

Quimby Narz. When he answered she said, “We need more samples from as many of the victims as you can find. And, soon, please.”

“Winging their way to you as we speak, Anne,” he told her. “You may find this difficult to believe but I actually figured that one out myself. Three planes will be landing at Shopton Regional over the next four hours. You’ll have the last of the samples before six this evening.”

“Good for you, Quimby. Take a biscuit out of petty cash. Goodbye!”

When she passed the news along, Wiley asked, “Annie? Are you going to be able to stay with us?”

Anne bit her lip. She hadn’t considered this and had made no provisions to ‘be at a friend’s’ for the evening with Damon or the kids. She took a deep breath and picked up the phone. “Hello, Damon? It’s Anne. Listen and don’t ask me questions. Okay. I’m heading out of town for the evening to a— I’m sorry? What did you say?”

She listened for a minute and then said, “Well, okay. I didn’t think they would be calling you, but I guess that’s saved me trying to explain it. I’ll see you tomorrow evening. Love you! Bye.” She hung up and looked at Wiley. “I was going to tell him that a dear friend called and asked me to stay over, but he got a call half an hour ago from the Alumni Foundation at my college and they explained that they were begging for me to come give a speech tomorrow morning at a breakfast, and that I had asked them to call so he wouldn’t think I was making anything up. Wow.”

“Good thing you didn’t get your stories mixed up,” Nigel

said.

“Yeah. I guess that means that it’s Nigel coffee and candy bars and ghost stories all around the old camp fire tonight, fellows,” she told them.

As they continued to work with the samples they had, a buzzer would go off periodically and new batches of samples would appear.

Everything needed to be cataloged and divided into sample types. Nigel took that job on as Anne and Wiley fed them onto the various test equipment. Time after time the results came back the same.

DNA strands looked normal.

Cells looked fine although enlarged until emptied and then the leftover sacs had the same thin, withered and mottled appearance.

At ten-thirty that evening the first of the mice became ill. With the three tiring scientist looking on, mice from all three of the ‘exposed to bone’ groups began wobbling on their legs and then falling over. By midnight the first one died, and by two all of the mice in the first three groups were dead.

However, and Anne had to force herself to take this as good news, none of the mice in any of the other groups showed the slightest symptoms.

“Can we say that this is from direct contact, including inhalation, but not person-to-person?” Nigel asked them. “Even via body fluids?”

“First indications would say as much,” Wiley told him, “That might mean that I could go into Penny’s room and

not be infected.” He looked at the others hopefully.

Anne shook her head. “Not a wise test, Wiley. Let the doctor and his nurse continue to watch out for her. The last time I checked she was holding her own.”

Nigel was about to say something when Anne smacked herself on the forehead. “Airborne? Particulates? Right? We’ve never tried to see if we can capture anything these are giving off. Ye gods! Wiley? Help me set up for an aspirated filter test. Everything we have on hand from, oh, one-quarter microns up to twenty. No, make that fifty microns.”

They scurried around calling up the necessary equipment while Nigel slipped out to make another pot of coffee. By the time he came back they were just turning the equipment off.

“Now we see what we’ve got,” Anne declared.

It required two hours to sort through everything but they finally arrived at a conclusion. Each area of the large bone was putting off micro particles in the half to one micron range. These had been collected and were being sent to the electron microscope while she tried another experiment. After isolating one piece of bone, she doused it with water, soaking the entire thing. She then repeated the filter test using just the one-quarter up to the two micron filters. As she hoped, there were zero particulates coming from the wet bone.

“As long as they remained underwater or in the mud they were absolutely safe. Probably didn’t even leech into the soil or water around them. It was just when people dug them up and then washed off the gunk and dried

them that they started this micro deterioration and sloughed off the deadly bits.”

“Well, now that we know how they made it onto and into people, we just need to find out what they are doing to cause the illness and what can be done to counteract them,” Nigel said.

By six they were all so dead tired that Anne was afraid they might start missing something. She called for a one-hour break. They each fell fitfully asleep and felt miserable an hour later when the alarm she had set on her computer woke them.

She went off to the ladies room to splash some water in her face and to brush out her hair. She didn't dare look at herself in the mirror for fear of what she might see.

On the way back down the hallway it hit her. The withering of the cell wall. The horrible, mottled wrinkles. She sprinted the final few yards and rushed into the room.

“Sickle Cell,” she announced. “If you've ever seen a blood cell effected by Sickle Cell and seen it punctured, the sac around the cell looks quite a bit like that!” She pointed at the computer screen that still showed one of Penny's empty cell membranes.” Most people just see the flattened cells, but those are full. I've seen samples of the empty call sacs and they look a lot like ours.”

“I'm not a physician,” Wiley told them. “What is the cure?”

Anne looked at him with sadness in her eyes. “There are only treatments but no cure today. Of course, that's when it comes to our modern Sickle Cell. Some doctors and

researchers think that most people up to a hundred years or so ago were able to fight it off to some extent, but the unbridled use of antibiotics in the past five decades might be the reason why it is considered incurable. And, that it continues to genetically modify itself.”

“So,” Wiley asked with renewed hope, “if this is some form of ancient Sickle Cell, might it be possible to cure it? I mean, Penny has had only two courses of antibiotics in her life that I can remember and those were fifteen to twenty years ago. Maybe if this is an old form it will respond?”

“Quick, Nigel. Infect one of the other mice. Just one I think with whatever did the very first one in as quickly as it did. I've got to see if we have any Hydroxyurea on hand.”

“What's that?” Wiley asked.

“The only major medication for Sickle Cell, Doctor,” Nigel said. “At least, the one major 'last hope' medicine.”

She went next door and spoke with the doctor attending Penny. He shook his head and told her that it never occurred to him to stock any in the lab.

A call to Agent Narz got him out of the shower a little wet and perturbed, but once he found out the reason he promised to have the medication delivered within the hour.

By early afternoon the newly infected mouse began to show signs of the disease. Anne injected it with the anti-Sickle Cell drug and left it alone. Twenty minutes later it was up on its feet and looking none the worse for wear. Half an hour later they took a small blood sample and

examined an empty cell sac. Though still slightly mottled, it was a great improvement.

“Can we declare this to be a bona fide miracle cure?” Nigel asked although neither Anne nor Wiley opted to reply. “I’ve never seen anything work so quickly, even though it is a mouse. At the rate it reacted, I’d expect about two to three hours for a human subject.” He looked at them both.

Anne was trying to recall if there was anything else she knew about effective treatments for the disease.

The absolute strangest thing about this case was that it appeared to be jumping years of symptoms of the disease. The long-term pain, the years of debilitating illness culminated with the cells being unable to hold their shape or do their jobs. Everything was crammed into days. Or, in the case of the mice, just hours.

Which may be why, she thought, the medication seems to work a miracle in minutes.

Wiley sat on his stool with a look like that of a small, lost child. His eyes were unfocused. Anne moved toward him. She believed he might be on the verge of collapse.

“I am going to make a decision for my daughter.” Wiley stood up and straightened his shoulders. “If I am wrong, I will suffer the consequences,” he announced. “I am giving her the injection.”

Neither Anne nor Nigel raised a question or tried to stop him. All Anne did was to suggest something that had just come to mind, “Put her on pure oxygen, Wiley, I once read an article that said that O₂ saturation is beneficial.”

Giving her a sad smile and a pat on the shoulder, the

older scientist left the room

Shortly after five p.m. Penny Oswaldt opened her eyes and looked up into the teary eyes of her father.

“Hello, Papa,” she said giving him a weak grin.

“Hello, my angel,” he said to her. He leaned over and kissed her forehead. “Glad to have you back!”

In the lab, Anne was talking with Quimby Narz.

“So, you’re certain that the problem is that the bones are sort of shedding this bad stuff and that mutated gene thingie is what made people sick?”

Anne said that she believe that to be true.

“So, is it possible to coat the bones in something that will seal them all up? There will be you-know-where to pay if we take away all those bones forever. The PR is already looking pretty bad for us. If we can’t promise the public that we’ve contained this problem, and really and truly cleaned the whole mess up, this will turn into a fiasco.”

“More than if dozens or hundreds or even thousands of people died?” Anne asked with an arched eyebrow. “I have a suggestion. You might give a very nice man I happen to know a call. You have his number; you used it yesterday to get me excused, remember?” Narz lightly blushed. “Anyway, this wonderful man has this miracle stuff called Tomasite. It even comes in a liquid form. You can buy big buckets from the nice man and spray it all over the bones. It should,” she said turning serious, “seal them up and make them safe. It’s a light white so it will cover the yellow and give the bones a bit of a cleaner look.”

“What if the nice man asks how I found out about this Toma-whatzit stuff?”

“Tomasite, Quimby, and it’s no secret. Just tell him that a contact you have in the State Department mentioned it in conjunction with this bone thing. He won’t pry too far. Trust me!”

* * * * *

Anne sat at the breakfast table, sipping a cup of double-brewed coffee, perusing the latest edition of *The Shopton Bulletin*. She was not finding anything of interest.

It had been well over two weeks since she, Nigel and Wiley had figured out the toxic DNA connection and come up with the antidote. Only one additional person had died from exposure and that eventually was determined to be from his prolonged exposure; he slept and lived right in the lab where he was working on the bones, even after he became ill.

There hadn’t been—and she wasn’t sure why she thought there might be—any stories about the deaths connected to what was now being hailed as the Shopton Massive Fossil Cache so far and today’s paper was equally void of any articles.

She glanced up at the sound of the alarm that blanketed the Swift’s property in a security screen. From the tone being emitted, she knew that this wasn’t a sudden, rush invasion of the property. Arriving at the front door she glanced at the LCD display.

An attractive young woman, probably in her late twenties, stood outside. Anne opened the door.

“Hello. Uh, Mrs. Swift?” the young woman asked.

“Yes. May I help you?”

“Well, you may not remember me, but we met about nine years ago. I’ve probably changed too much, but...”

As Anne looked at her, the woman began blushing and was only looking at her own feet.

“I’m so sorry, but I really don’t know who you are,” Anne told her even though something was telling her that she did.

“I know. But I had to come by to give you this—” the girl stopped talking and stepped forward. Before Anne could react she was being hugged. She detected the soft sobs that were coming from the young woman and decided to return the hug. It didn’t seem to be a dangerous situation.

Twenty seconds later the other woman released Anne and looked up into her eyes. “Thank you,” she whispered, turning away. She walked quickly to the small compact car sitting at the curb and opened the driver’s door.

“Wait!” called Anne. “I still don’t know who you are.”

The woman gave her a smile. “I’m Penny Oswaldt,” she said as she got in the car and drove away.

Anne closed the door and returned to the kitchen.

It took almost an hour for the smile to leave her face.

FROM THE SAME AUTHOR

Coming Soon...

