



THE ANNE SWIFT INVESTIGATES SERIES

Anne Swift: Molecular Biologist Detective The Incendiary Insect Infestation

By T. Edward Fox

A flower farmer hears a mysterious roar outside his mobile home one night. It seems to be punctuated with hundreds of tiny *pops!* When he goes out to investigate, he sees what looks like a low-altitude fireworks display.

The following morning his neighbor discovers his burnt body in the middle of his field of flowers.

Anne must work with a team she has never met, and who have a very bad working dynamic, as she struggles to understand what might have caused this mysterious death.

Then, a second death and a sighting of a huge swarm of insects puts her on the trail of one of the more baffling cases she has taken on.

Can she get her team to work together long enough to solve the mystery?

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This is dedicated to anyone who has ever found themselves in the middle of a swarm of flying insects. They get in your mouth, your eyes, your hair and your ears. Can you imagine what it would be like if, once there, they suddenly exploded? Yikes!

THE ANNE SWIFT INVESTIGATES SERIES

Anne Swift and the Incendiary Insect Infestation

FOREWORD

Of the half dozen or so Anne Swift's adventures I have been made privy to, I have to say that this is near the top of my list of strange ones. She has dealt with things much more deadly and much more insidious, but never something as intriguing.

She has also never been so infuriated with her coworkers.

Anne is a consummate professional while on one of her assignments. Those she typically works with, like her favorite, Wiley Oswaldt, are both equally professional as well as being very likable. Poor Anne is thrown for a real loop this time by the threat of having to deal with a trio she privately dubs, 'The Three @#!>%! Stooges.'

As a quick aside, the latest declassified briefing paper for another of Anne's adventures has just been given to me by my official Washington contact. I've taken a few moments to read it and... wow! What a doozy.

Well, that one will have to wait until I get this tale of woe, frustration and backbiting completed.

T. Edward Fox

CHAPTER 1 /

IT BEGAN WITH A BANG

IT WOULD be a wonderful vacation, Anne Swift was telling herself as she worked to unpack the three suitcases her daughter Sandy had filled to overflowing, and fit just the essentials into a single case of things that would actually be needed in Hawaii.

The Big Island. *Hawaii!* The name conjured up memories of coconut and rum drinks and sunsets looking out over the ocean to the west of the condominium she and her husband, renowned inventor and scientist Damon Swift, had stayed in almost eight years earlier as a tenth anniversary gift to each other.

This time, the second floor condo just yards from the water's edge would not be large enough, so Damon had arranged to borrow a four-bedroom apartment just a few blocks up the hill in Kona.

"And, the first thing I'm going to do is—"

Her cell phone broke her train of thought. Pulling it from the pocket of her dungaree pants, she let out a heavy sigh upon seeing the special code numbers that flashed on and off on the screen. She could almost imagine that they were taunting her with a constant, "No fun! No fun!"

"Hello, Quimby," she whispered in a tone she hoped would translate into the anguish and anger she was beginning to feel. "I'm out the door in three hours. Call again sometime." She snapped the cover back, cutting off the call.

She silently muttered—1, 2, 3, 4—*ring, ring!* her counting was interrupted by a repeat of the code numbers. She stepped out the side door from her kitchen before

answering.

"Have you no decency, Agent Narz?" she asked the man she knew would be on the other end of the line.

"Hello, Anne," he said sounding a little tentative.

Anne smiled at the idea she might have instilled some sense of doubt or even dread in the man she worked for—secretly, and as a top molecular and microbiologist on special assignments from the FBI—several times each year.

"Afraid I have something for you, Anne. We had a mysterious death a few nights ago up close to the Canadian border. Little village called, uh... oh. There it is. Place called Bombay. Hmm? Anyway, neighbors heard a series of little explosions about midnight that night and found the farmer, a man who grows—uh, grew—sweet peas and hops and flowers, face down with hundreds and hundreds of contact burns all over his clothing and exposed body parts. Coroner is thinking of calling it auto-immolation. He might have termed it torture by burning except that there is nothing that small, that hot and, from what he sees in the burns, that explosive that could account for it."

Anne didn't say anything as she processed what her Government contact had said.

"Umm, are you still there, Anne?" Narz asked. He now sounded apologetic and for a moment, she feel a little sorry for his position.

"Yes, Quimby, I'm still here. But, it's as I said, Damon and I and Sandy are just about to head to the airport and then play airline hopscotch to Albany, Newark, Chicago, San Francisco and then on to the Big Island of Hawaii. Have a heart. Call back in a week. Once I get home I'll guarantee to give you all my free time. Promise. In the meantime have their local cops look into his being killed by cigarette burns, because that's exactly what this sounds like to me."

Narz cleared his throat just as Damon Swift stepped out of the door with his arms full of suitcases. She pointedly stared at them and then to the ground. Knowing his wife, he set the bags down and waited.

"Can you hold for a minute?" she said into the phone. Evidently receiving an affirming answer, she dropped her phone hand to her side and pointed with the other one. "Those two are ours and can go, and that larger blue one is Sandy's, but the others stay here. And, don't let her give you any guff. She knows she gets one bag and lost any rights to packing it when she defied my order to keep it to the one."

He smiled, leaned over and gave her a kiss on the cheek and took the approved bags out to the car in the driveway. While he was opening the trunk and getting things packed away she brought the phone back to her ear.

"You have ten seconds. Go."

"Anne, we've had a death about ninety miles from here. Flower farmer...rancher?...anyway he died from almost a thousand little burns all over his body. Some look like tiny explosions. They are not cigarette burns. According to the coroner in Bombay, each—"

"Bombay?" she said in an astounded voice.

"What about Bombay, Anne?" her husband asked as he passed by her on the way back into the house.

"Oh, just a friend thinking of heading there to help with the lepers," she skillfully lied to him.

"Oh. Tell her to have a wonderful time and not to take any tips!" He laughed at his joke. As he went through the door she stuck her tongue out at him. *Lepers. Tips, indeed!*

"What the hell do we have to do with Bombay, India?" she hissed into the phone.

"No, Anne. Bombay, New York. A bit more than one

thousand people. Almost on the border. Anyway, the coroner says that most of the burns have some sort of strange material in them. He can't tell what it is and has asked for FBI assistance. You're the nearest expert we have. I hate to ask—"

"Then, don't! Get the body down here, put it on ice, and I'll be back by next Tuesday evening. Wednesday morning, I'll be in. Not now and not before. You've known about this vacation for months, so things will have to wait until I get back. Bye!"

With that, she snapped the phone shut, pressed the power button and turned it off.

"What the heck was that, Mother?" Sandy inquired as she came out carrying the two other suitcases.

"Hold it right there, young lady. Those stay. And," she held up a warning finger, "if you so much as let out a whine or a squeak of protest, I swear that I'll unpack everything from the one bag I told you you *could* bring, and put one bathing suit and a single blouse and pair of shorts into paper bag and that will be all you take. Get me?"

She gave Sandy such a determined look that the blonde gulped and meekly nodded her head.

"Anyway, to answer your question, an old friend of mine is thinking of heading to Bombay to work with lepers and asked me to help her decide if she should do it. I was simply telling her that I am off to Hawaii, and since she isn't supposed to leave for several weeks I told her my assistance will have to wait." She looked at her daughter to see if the lie had been accepted.

Sandy narrowed her eyes a little, but had been so taken aback over the suitcase rebuke that she let it pass. "Lepers, huh? Well, I hope she knows not to take any tips." She giggled at what she believed to be a clever joke, but soon

stopped when she saw the exasperated look on her mother's face.

An hour later the three of them were waiting to go through the security gate at the airport. Sandy had overcome her initial shock and was starting to verbally jab at Anne over the "total loss of anything I can possibly wear while we're there. I'll be absolutely naked, *Mother!*"

This caused several men and teenage boys to turn and look at her. She let out a little squeak and tried to move behind her father.

It didn't help things when Sandy found herself seated between two of the teenage boys—probably about fifteen—who snickered and stared at her chest the entire trip to Albany.

She would have told them to, "Take a picture, it lasts longer," until she spotted the digital camera in one of their shirt pockets.

* * * * *

Hawaii was incredible and Anne was so relaxed that by the second day she forgot all about FBI Agent Quimby Narz and the exploding flower farmer. But, as she was checking the latest weather report for Shopton on the third morning, her phone rang. She let out a sigh when she saw the code number plus the extra flashing 1 at the end.

It was the emergency code. It meant that things were bad and she really needed to pick up. She pressed the Talk button and stepped out onto the lanai surrounding the front three-quarters of the condo.

"I'm here," she stated. "I'll assume that this is a real emergency. Talk to me."

"Anne. First, I did get your message when we spoke last. And, I've tried to hold off on things, but we've had two more

deaths up there. Same thing. Burned by hundred, maybe even thousands of what appear to be little explosions. One of our supposed experts in the Duluth lab claims that it must be micrometeorites. He wants to come out to Shopton to prove his theory.”

Anne let a deep breath out through her nose in one snort. “Don’t tell me. Barry Swisher?” she guessed.

“Yeah. Barry. I know you two have butted heads before, and he can be a real pain with his wild theories, but he does come through in the end.”

“Oh, sure,” she said exasperatedly. “Comes through but never retracts his erroneous theory or apologizes for stepping on people’s toes. He just bulls his way through and then steps forward to accept the praise. He will only set foot in my lab if and when I quit. And, that will be immediately if you so much as tell me he’s left Minnesota and is heading to New York. Even if he’s going on vacation. Get me?”

She heard Narz gulp. “Got you, Anne. Only, it’s too late. He’s already here. Now, before you explode and quit and scream at me and make threats, I have to remind you that you refused to take part in this.”

Anne’s voice was now low and practically growling as she told him, “I said I would take on the assignment when I got back. Unless you have a signed order from the President himself naming me as the one and only reason this is going to take a few extra days, and unless he and the entire Congress deem this to be the absolute number one priority for the entire nation, then get that son of a—”

She stopped short when Damon came outside. “I don’t mean to snoop, but your voice is carrying all around the condo. Your Bombay friend?” he asked giving her a look of concern.

All Anne could do was to nod. Her body and throat were

all tensed up and she dared not speak for a moment.

“Do you have to cut this early,” he asked.

She nodded, looking at him sadly. “Sorry,” she barely got out before tears began flowing down her cheeks. He took her in his arms and gave her a soft hug.

“You do what is right,” he told her. “Sandy and I will stay here in case you can come back for the last day or so. I love you, Anne,” he told her, his mouth buried in her hair.

Once he had gone back inside, she picked up the phone and said just four words before hanging up. “I’ll be there tomorrow.”

* * * * *

Damon had driven her to the airport where she was fortunate enough to be able to get the next flight out to Portland, Oregon. From there she flew to Seattle and Chicago before getting a direct flight to Albany. Her final flight was the last flight up to Shopton of the day and she tumbled into bed well after midnight.

The following morning she showered and dressed and drive the car downtown, parking in front of a meter that had a canvas DO NOT PARK bag over it. Stepping out, she removed the bag and saw the time suddenly set to two hours. It would count down to only a few minutes left before automatically resetting to two hours again, and do this as long as her car was parked there.

Entering the Merchants & Co. Bank, she noted that all the tellers were busy with other people, so she stepped to the end desk and signed in to access a safe deposit box.

A petite Asian woman rose from her desk across the bank and greeted Anne with a small nod. They went inside the large vault where the woman inserted a key into a box on the back wall and Anne inserted hers as well. Giving them

both a turn, the bank employee removed her key and left, shutting the privacy door behind her. Anne turned her key again, removed it, and stepped back to watch the entire wall move backward an inch and then slide silently to the side.

Once on the other side of the wall, it slid shut and lights came on illuminating the small room. Sitting on a small shelf was a credit card-sized security badge that she clipped to her blouse. It would allow faster access through another entrance for the duration of this project. She opened a door and walked down the two flights of stairs, coming out into a hallway with four doors on one side and a fifth one at the far end. She entered the second door.

Sitting on one of the stools was a medium-size man. His suit looked a little ruffled as did his face. One look was enough to show that he had not slept the previous night, or if he had, it had been a restless one still dressed in the suit.

“Morning, Quimby,” she greeted him. Seeing his state, she asked, “Cat drag you in, or are you just trying to get my sympathy?”

With a rueful grin, he replied, “I thought it best to be here to take your wrath rather than for you to be alone. This lab has several millions of dollars of valuable equipment in it, and as angry as I can tell that you are, and no insult meant, I would rather you weren’t here without, as it were, adult supervision.” Seeing the look on her face he hastened to add, “Anne. We had to get started on this. It just couldn’t wait. This could turn out to be a diplomatic nightmare and the President has requested all haste.”

Anne sighed heavily. “Okay. You got me back and ruined everything Hawaii did for me, so give me the entire story. Start with that bit about diplomatic nightmare. That intrigues me.”

“Fine, but as with everything down here, it stays here.

Evidently the Prime Minister of Canada has a shirttail relative in Bombay, so he’s raised a real stink with our State Department. He claims that our Government must be trying out some sort of chemical warfare agents and want it stopped before this other person gets injured.”

“Or, it spills over the border into Canada. Nice that he his so concerned with his entire nation.” Anne’s voice exuded sarcasm with each syllable. Narz knew better than to point this out to her. He was already trying to find the words to tell his superiors if and when she actually did quit on him.

He had been working on that for several years and still got a stabbing pain in his gut over it.

“Well, yeah,” he responded after a few seconds. “The bad thing is that we got the first body in here this morning. It’s pretty gruesome, Anne. It actually does look like a thousand tiny explosions hit him all over.”

She nodded. “Ahh, so this isn’t something that came from a single direction?”

Narz frowned. “No. As I said, it is all over the body. Why?”

Anne smiled at him. “That is so nice to hear. So, now you will go down to the break room or wherever you’ve hidden him and escort Barry Swisher out of this facility. The whole 360-degree thing puts his theory about micrometeorites in the trash. Not to mention, by the way, that such tiny fragments hitting after coming all the way down through our atmosphere—an atmosphere that I ought to be enjoying in Hawaii!—would go right through the body. Now, get him the you-know-what out of my lab!”

For a moment, Quimby Narz appeared to be a man of great conflicting forces. He stopped and started for the door three times before finally nodding once and leaving the room. A minute later Anne heard a voice that wasn’t his

asking, “Why shouldn’t I stay? She can’t have all the glory,” before the sound of the elevator bell told her they were about to head up.

Anne got fewer and fewer pleasures out of working for the FBI these past couple of years. This was one of them, and she was still basking in it when the door opened and Quimby stuck his head inside.

“Okay, Anne. Barry is leaving. I’ve go another agent taking him to the airport where we’ll fly him out in our helicopter and down to Albany. You won’t be bothered by his presence. Anyway, if you’re ready I’ll have the body brough into the chamber.”

He meant the triple-walled examination chamber at the back of the lab room. It ran the entire twenty-five feet and was totally sealed. Underneath was a series of rooms and vaults that could hold many different specimens ready to be looked over, dissected and cut up for closer looks, even down to the cellular level.

The room outside the chamber, Anne’s lab, was filled with specialty machinery to let her perform such micro exams.

With a nod to the agent she sat down on her favorite stool and waited.

“First, let me tell you a bit more about all this.”

CHAPTER 2 /

“I DON’T WORK WITH STOOGES!”

THE BASIC story Agent Narz presented quickly began to intrigue Anne. Within a minute she was leaning forward and all thoughts of bitterness had disappeared.

“We have all five—yes, it is now five people and about a dozen horses, and hundreds of birds—bodies in the storage vault as of this morning. Each one has the same random pattern of small explosive burns. Exposed areas were the worst hit with pockmarks ranging from a quarter millimeter up to almost three millimeters, but generally coming from one side or another. None of these started from the top down. Even clothed areas with a single layer, like a shirt, have lots of these burns. In fact, the area isn’t known for people buying lots of natural fibers, so the typical victim’s polyester shirt were virtually exploded and burned off the bodies. Probably in seconds.”

Anne was shaking her head in amazement. “I suppose you had better tell me what that buffoon Swisher has done.”

Quimby loosened his tie. He looked decidedly uncomfortable. “Well, before I could get down here and stop him he autopsied the first victim. Not being a medical doctor he did a pretty bad job of it. I’m sorry, Anne. There wasn’t anybody else and things happened over my head.”

It was a story she had heard several times before. The first time she had disbelieved him and was proven to be wrong. Ditto the second time. Since then, she gave him the benefit of the doubt.

“Did he find anything useful?”

Narz shook his head. “No. Claims that I pulled him off the case before he was able to put all of the facts together. The

truth is that he spent a full day yesterday flaying tissue off the corpse and cutting into the body cavity. All he managed to leave is a list of organ weights and measurements. Well, that plus the samples he put in those little sealed bottles you use down here.”

This was unbelievable to Anne. There was certainly little if anything to be gleaned from any study of the internal organs. It was the large, outside organ of the skin that had taken all the damage as she could now see from the body that had been automatically delivered to the table in the camber. At best she believed she might find that one or more of the victims died from heart failure brought on, no doubt, by the severe pain of whatever had attacked them.

“Nothing else?”

With a snort, Quimby added, “His parting words were, ‘Mark me, Narz. in the end you will find out that these people were victims of self-immolation, or that they torched themselves processing methamphetmines!’ I’ve already started the paperwork to have his contract either restricted or terminated.”

She nodded. “Good. So, tell me who is going to be available to assist. Wiley would be nice but I know he is in the hospital with his prostate cancer. So, who?” She looked at the agent with expectation.

He pulled out a piece of paper from his inside coat pocket and consulted it. “Jacqui Salazar, Stephan Roth, and—” he bit his lower lip before continuing, “—Alyson Saccatelli.”

Anne’s head was wildly swinging from side to side. “No. no and hell no! I don’t ever want to see any of them in here. I won’t work with stooges like that. Barry with his idiocies is one thing. One of those three can’t remember to label anything, another believes that she is an expert in anything that happens to be going on, and the third is a danger to

himself and to others. Remember the time he flooded the lab in Maine with halon gas just to put out a small fire in a wastepaper basket? Seven good people hospitalized and one practically died.” Under her breath she mumbled, “Too bad it wasn’t him.”

Sighing, he told her, “They’re all I’ve got inside the U.S. right now. If not them, then you’re going to have to go this alone for at least five days before I can get someone like Margie Turner or Penelope Cooper in here.”

Anne pursed her lips. She knew, and had worked with, Margie Turner before, but the other woman’s name was new to her. “Tell me about this Penelope person.”

“Okay. Well, she’s a graduate of the U.S. Naval Academy with a double degree, one in Chemistry and the second one in their Small Satellites program with a specialization in miniature airborne ordnance.”

“You certainly rattled that one off, Quimby. Am I suppose to be intrigued?”

“Yes, you are. With this case having bits of both of her specialties she was the first one the computer spit out during my search. On top of everything else, he C.O. tells me that she blessed with what he calls, ‘A brain designed to scan and digest information.’ If I give you her service jacket, will you consider her?” He reached over to the desk and picked up an inch-thick military service folder and handed it to Anne.

“All right. Give me two hours. I’ll give you my decision then. One hour to see what havoc has been wrecked here with the first body and another to review her records. When did you say she could be here?”

“Five days. Right now she is in a secret location in the Middle East but is due to head stateside in three days. We’ve never used her before, but she has been cleared al

the way up and knows that she might get the occasional assignment during her down time.”

Now it was Anne’s turn to snort. “Right. Down time. Full military career, secret assignments and she has copious amounts of free time. How long can I have her if I do chose her?”

Narz consulted another piece of paper from his jacket pocket. “Seven weeks. After that she goes on a month’s leave to get married. Call me soon,” he said as he rose and turned to leave.

Anne coughed and he immediately stopped moving recognizing her signal. “Uh, yes?” he inquired turning back to face her.

She explained about her “friend” and the “Bombay situation.”

“I will have one of our female agents place a call to Damon asking if you had already left Hawaii. She’ll say something like she tried last night but your phone was off—probably in airplane mode and the like—and that you must have left it tuned off. Sorry to bother, et cetera.”

“Thanks!”

He left and Anne sat down to think. Although she really wanted to look at both the first victim’s body as well as the others, the fact that she had the service record of her potential coworker in her hand took priority, so she sat back and opened the cover.

Fifteen minutes later, after scanning through most of the pages, she picked up her receiver and dialed a special number. On hearing a series of beeps, she spoke, “Yes. Penelope. Soonest. Oh, I’d rather do this solo than have any of that other three,” and hung up.

As she had been able to see from her stool, the body in the

chamber was a man, possibly in his late sixties or early seventies, and he had far too many small, cauterized wounds on his face, torso and limbs to even begin to count. The odd thing about them is that none appeared to overlap, almost as if something had hit him, evenly spaced, with searing points.

But the closer she looked as she directed the camera over the body, was that each spot was a pock. She zoomed in on a cluster of the on his abdomen until she could discern the pattern each one left in the flesh.

“It looks as if something about the size of the head of a pin exploded just above the surface,” she spoke into her recording software. “The, uh, wounds will have to do for now, the wounds in this area show signs of having an incredibly hot explosive force come downward, or rather straight into the body, both scorching the skin as well as forcing it downward into the body by one or several millimeters and the flesh nearly melted and pushed up to leave a slight raised ring around the wound. If I were a space scientist I’d say this man has a series of craters all over the exposed parts of his body.”

She continued the outer exam using the pantographic arm, or Waldoes, to turn the body over. Anne, generally immune to what she had to deal with gagged once when all the tiny indentations on the man’s back held him to the table like tiny suckers on a body-sized octopus arm. Due to normal decomposition some of the flesh stuck to the stainless steel table surface and pulled away from the body.

Something very unappealing oozed out and spread on the table.

Anne took a deep breath, decided that temporary retreat was called for, and left the room to go get a cup of mind cleansing coffee.

When she came back her composure had reasserted itself and she was able to continue with the exam.

After concluding that, at least on this body, the attacking X had been the same all around, she moved the arms over to pick up a scalpel and a package of a dozen tissue sample dishes. Her first samples—four of the ones she would take—came from the tissues that had stuck to the table. She made notes as to where on the body these had come and moved on. When finished she had her dozen samples from many portions of the body. These included several from areas less damaged such as the buttocks where his denim trousers and back pockets had provided some armor, and from the bottom of his feet, the only place completely untouched.

That fact alone gave her an answer to one of her questions, this one regarding why the man's shoes might have been removed. Evidently they hadn't. He must have gone outside in his bare feet.

Of her first set of samples several showed only scorched flesh. As she studied these she wished she had taken deeper samples and not just the top layers of destroyed skin.

With a little sigh she got up from the SwiftScope—her super microscope with video enhancements—and sent back to the chamber.

To her surprise the body was gone!

Anne stepped back and thought a moment, Had she pressed the necessary code into the keyboard to have it removed and put back into storage? She shook her head. No. She most definitely had not done that.

A call was in order before proceeding.

“Quimby, Anne. Listen. I need you to call back pronto. My first body was pulled back down to storage without my authorizing it. Soonest will be bestest. Ta!”

She had to wait a couple minutes before her desk phone rang.

“This had better be some new ‘We’re doing more for you without having to be asked,’ sort of thing,” she said by way of a greeting.

“Actually, Anne,” the agent began, sounding unhappy, “we had to take it back away from you. Word came down eight... no nine minutes ago from the very top. All bodies are to be returned to Canada today. For whatever reason, they are claiming that this is theirs. I don’t know what to tell you.”

Anne pondered her choices. “Hang on one minute,” she said and put the phone down. She went back to the keyboard for the chamber and typed in a set of commands. She smiled when she saw a green light and a countdown of fifteen seconds start on the small screen.

Just before the time elapsed, a door in the back of the chamber was drawn backwards into that wall and then it slid upward. A few seconds later and the body she had been examining came out and was slid onto the table.

She reached over and picked up the phone.

“Quimby? Still there?” He told her he was. “Great. So here’s the thing. You say this happened in some place called Bombay, which is supposed to be within our national borders. So, I have a difficult time figuring out why the big man has said we are to cowtow to the Canucks and send our citizens to them. Come back here and explain things to be in great gib legal terms. Maybe we can have a nice chat with Mr. Give-em-Away in DC. Bye.”

She hung up and went back to the keyboard. Three minutes later she had two other bodies and one of the horses all inside the chamber.

Before Quimby Narz arrived she had taken more than one hundred samples from the bodies. Some were surface scrapings and some were as deep as an inch. Each one was automatically labeled with what she typed into the keyboard and all samples had just gone through another, smaller, door and into storage for use in all of her nice and expensive instruments.

Anne Swift was not happy about the prospect that the bodies might be taken, but she was damned if she was not going to have a wide range of samples to continue studying.

A light knock came on the door and it opened just enough for Agent Narz's voice to come in.

"Can I safely enter or will you be throwing something at me?"

She sighed. "As much fun as it might be to hit you with a severed arm or something right now, you may enter without fear," she said in a false cheerful tone.

He came in, took one look at the pile up of corpses—including the horse!—in the chamber and turned pale.

"What are you doing?" he demanded.

"My job," she calmly answered. "The job you dragged me away from my family to do because it was so gosh darned important. 'Help me, Anne. You're my only hope!' sort of thing. Remember that?"

When he failed to get anything other than a small squeak out, she continued. "I am harvesting samples for us, and by that I mean *me*, to examine so that we might do what we all get paid for."

He sat down heavily and put his head in his hands.

"Oh, Anne, Anne, Anne. Do you realize what might happen to you?"

She smiled, rather broadly and happily. "I could get anything from a pat on the back to a reprimand to being fired. I'll take any of those. In fact, let me make this really easy for you. Oh, you might want to take notes so you can quote me on this. If you don't give me permission to do what I was called in for, and that includes keeping these bodies—all of them—here so I can get a definitive view of what happened, then you can stick this job. I will immediately quit. I will jump up and down on my special little phone until it is special little bits and pieces and then feed them into the shredder so they can never be put back together. I will go to court and get a restraining order against you, the entire FBI and all of the people you have ever saddled me with, with the exception of Wiley Oswaldt and maybe a few others."

He was pale and sweaty and sat there for nearly four minutes before he managed to find some words to say.

They were almost too calm. "Anne. I am going to get fired over this one, but you need to know something. Bombay is an experimental laboratory. The whole town and surrounding area. It is ringed with heat and motion sensors to detect anyone trying to get in... or out. The people you have in there are all scientists and biologists and geneticists. Bombay is in the business of studying each and every genetically modified crop developed in the world.

"They are fed by an organization that spans the globe who buy, borrow or outright steal seeds from the fifty or so labs around that do GM work."

Anne sat there, seething but listening. Something tickled in her brain. "And, my guess is that it might be down on our side of the border, but it is all paid for by Canada, huh?"

He nodded. "As far as I have been told, yes." She made a decision. "Okay. The bodies go back but I keep the samples. Tell 'em they were parts that sloughed off and our protocols

forces us to incinerate them. Anything, but they do not leave here until I have finished with them.”

Narz let out a little, pained, chuckle. “At least you didn’t do something like hiding one or more of them.”

“Oh, I could have done so much more than that, Quimby. All I need to do is destroy that keypad over there. As you once told me, it is the nexus for everything that goes on in that chamber and there is no ready replacement for it.”

Narz paled once again as he realized she was correct.

“One bash of my very angry fist, Quimby, and it would either be your face or that keyboard that would never work again!”

CHAPTER 3 /

NEW HELP ON AN ELUSIVE TRAIL

PENELOPE Cooper arrived the following Monday. She and Quimby were waiting for Anne when she walked through the lab door at nine. She stopped short at the sight of the new assistant.

“Hi,” Penelope said giving Anne a little wave of her right hand. “You’re probably looking at the purple hair. A little trick my Navy buddies pulled the night before I headed to Germany. Sorry,” she finished meekly.

Anne walked over to her and extended a hand. “Nonsense. I’ll admit it was a bit of a shock, but probably not as much for me as it must have been for you. I’m known as Barbara Boone around here for various reasons.”

“It’s okay, Mrs. Swift. Agent Narz briefed me and I swear I’ll keep your identity top secret. It’s part of what I do every day. Mr. Narz also filled me on your, uh, work schedule as well. I’m fine with everything. It’s just a pleasure to get a chance to do more of what I’m trained for before I leave the service next year.”

Anne looked curiously at Quimby. “I thought you told me she’s an explosives expert,” she remarked.

He nodded. “I did, and she is. And, based on the preliminary findings of yours about the unknown volatile residue in the victims’ wounds I still believe that she is the perfect person to work with you.”

Now, Anne nodded. “Right.” She turned to the younger woman and said, “I’m sorry, Penelope. I’m so used to working with biologists and physicists that I didn’t do a good job of adding two and two.”

The girl giggled. “It’s okay. And, please call me Penny or

even P.”

“Great. I’m Anne. So, if we can get Agent Narz to haul his butt off my stool and get out of here, we can go to work. I’ve discovered several things over the past few days while waiting for my husband and daughter to come home from the *Hawaiian vacation* we all were on *before* he called!” She glared at Quimby, and he turned red.

A moment later he had excused himself and was out the door.

“Okay. Now that he’s gone, let me tell you how I hope we can work together,” Anne explained. “I have the final say in what we do and what we say outside of this room. That goes doubly for Quimby. Other than that, I want to encourage you to go for whatever tests and research you want to make.”

“That’s a whole lot more leeway than I get in the military,” Penny said. “But, I know chain of command so you are my General and I am your lieutenant. If I start to go astray, don’t hold back. I’d appreciate it if you didn’t yell or anything, but redirect me if I take a wrong turn.”

Anne had a feeling she was going to like working with the young woman.

“I have to tell you,” she explained, “that our lab only has some one hundred or so tissue samples taken from three bodies human, one body horse, and the bodies of a dozen unlucky birds.”

“Why no actual bodies?” Penny asked.

Anne thought over what she ought to tell the girl. “Umm, what did Quimby tell you about this?”

“Well, he told me this was a top secret lab and that you are the best of the best, but he also said something about there being so tight a clamp on this one particular problem

that it will likely never be declassified. I suppose that’s got to be the reason why whoever supplied the samples didn’t send bodies. Beyond that, I’ve got zero clue about cause or effect.”

Her new boss filled her in on the basic facts. A small agricultural town had suddenly seen several human deaths along with livestock and hundreds of birds. Each victim was covered with dozens to thousands of burn pockmarks.

“The most I’ve been able to tell is that the majority of the wounds I have sampled, or rather samples of, have three things in common: an explosive burn spot, no standard known explosive residue, and chitin.”

“Chitin? As in, oh, what’s it called again? Think, Penny! N-acetylglucosamine, or something like that? As in shells of crabs and bug bodies and that sort of thing?”

“Yes, and as in being cousins with cellulose and glucose, both of which in various forms can burn at a tremendous rate.” She looked at the younger woman, waiting to see what she might make of this information.

“Ahhhh. Yes, I see. So, the wounds or burns could have been made by some weapon sending out millions of tiny chitin covered somethings, sort of like little bombs, that hit the people and animals, and burned them to death?”

Anne shook her head. “Unfortunately, the humans and horses died, as near as I can tell, from heart attacks brought about by extreme fright and stress from whatever it was attacking their bodies. I’m sure pain had a lot to do as well.”

Penny was a quick study and narrowed her eyes. “But... wouldn’t you have had to see one or more of the bodies to determine that?”

Anne nodded. “I don’t want there to be any distrust between us, Penny, so I will now tell you that we did have

several bodies here last week, but they were taken from me. Us. And, I honestly have no idea what became of them. All I do know is that I managed to keep back some really good samples of human and equine flesh as well as a small consignment of the birds.”

“Oh. Why those?”

“My guess is whoever wanted or demanded the bodies felt they had more than enough other birds, assuming they have any interest in those, so they just told us to incinerate them. And we did, in another week or so!”

Penny grinned and winked. “Our secret I think,” she declared. “But, didn’t agent Nars say something about volatile residue?”

Anne nodded. “There is some carbon that should not be there along with a couple other things I can’t identify. All I know is they aren’t off-the-shelf explosive ingredients.”

They spoke a few more minutes about the samples before Penny asked, “Isn’t the material in birds’ beaks chitin or like that?”

“Keratin. More like our fingernails, Penny. Why?”

“Well, if whatever hit these people and animals was made of chitin, I wondered if it had reacted to the bird beaks differently. Maybe even more strongly.”

“Hmmm. I don’t know because I’ve been concentrating on the mammals. The birds are in the vacuum freezer.”

“I’m sorry. The what?”

Anne laughed. “The vacuum freezer. It puts a light vacuum inside the box, about what you might find at fifty-thousand feet, and takes the temperature down to thirty-three degrees. That’s cold enough so the vacuum doesn’t make the fluids boil and keeps all bacteria and other micro-organisms that might lead to decomposition at bay. We can keep

specimens in there for up to three weeks before we start to see degradation of cells.”

“Wow! So, A... that’s something I definitely want to see, and B... I don’t want to ever be put in there!”

Now, Anne laughed. “For starters, you are standing on it. It’s down below where no man goes. Or woman. So both your A and B are taken care of, but unsatisfactorily I suppose. Let me call up a bird or two to look at.”

Three minutes later the small bell sounded and a door on the side wall of the exam chamber opened. The body of a bird, about the size of a robin but with a more green sheen to its feathers, came out. Anne showed Penny how to work the Waldoes and to get the camera over and around the specimen.

In less than a minute the girl was nearly an expert operator.

“Interesting,” she muttered as she directed the lens to get a close look at the bird’s head. “And, ick! Whatever it was blinded our poor feathered friend here and made several scorch marks on the beak. Um, is there some way to open its mouth?”

“Yes, but you are not going to like it. We have to deapitate the specimen and bring it into one of the test chambers here in the lab. You up to that?”

“I’m going to need to be,” Penny admitted.

It took a quarter of an hour but the head was under the SwiftScope and they were using micro-sized Waldoes to pry the beak open for a better look.

“That,” Anne said pointing at the screen, “is most interesting, indeed. It appears that our friend here tried to eat one or two of whatever these little weapons are. See how the tongue and the back of the throat are burned?”

“Any of those throat burns in the humans or horses?”

“I saw nothing like that.”

Penny looked and then turned to Anne. “Is it too soon to make an assumption, ma’am?”

“Well, cut the ma’am stuff and then go ahead.”

Penny ticked off things on her fingers as she said, “Chitin. Burns. Birds with burns inside their mouths.” She lowered her hands and said, “Exploding bugs. Flying exploding bugs. Attacking flying exploding bugs!”

Anne blinked several times before stating, “Now, all we have to do is figure out how that is possible!”

* * * * *

Anne had to leave by four to get home in time to cover for herself. Penny asked to be allowed to remain but Anne had to tell her, “First day people must be supervised at all times. Sorry, Penny, but I’ll be back by nine-thirty tomorrow and can stay up till five. Let’s hit it again then.”

“Before you go, can I ask you something, Anne?”

“Sure. Shoot.”

“Is this... I mean, is having bodies around here, or not if they get taken, the norm for this lab?”

Anne stopped to think. “Mostly. We’ve had cases that included live and dead people, people who made live people dead, and things other than people that made people dead. So, yeah. Dead bodies amid a few live ones. Hopefully, and so far it’s worked out, if they come in alive we get them back out alive.”

Penny thought a moment before responding with a smile. “Good.”

When Anne returned the following day there was a note on the lab door:

In break room making coffee for us.

P.

She left the door closed and headed down the hall. As she entered the room Anne broke into a big smile.

“Ummmm! Cinnamon and orange. I love those smells.”

Penny turned from the coffee maker and picked up a plate of what looked to be sticky buns. “Here. I’m so used to getting up at six a.m. that I was banging around the apartment with nothing to do, so I made these. Just came out of the oven—” she looked at her watch as Anne took one off the offered plate, “—twenty-six minutes ago.”

Anne savored the tastes. On days like this she spent far too much time getting her husband and two children off to work or school (or now that it was summer, getting her son off to work and allowing her daughter to sleep in).

“These are amazing. You should be a baker. So,” she said taking another bite and chewing for a moment, “any additional thoughts about our possible flying insects of fiery death?”

Penny snickered. “Funny, Anne. That’s what I dubbed them last night while I was trying to get to sleep. But, to answer your question, the only thought I had was how nice it would be to be able to go gather any evidence at the site.”

With a sad shake of her head, Anne told her that wasn’t likely to happen. “What we can do is to do some research to see if this was absolutely localized or if there are other reports. Actually, while you do some of that research, I’m going to put some of the samples through the spectro-analysis unit and take a good look with the electron microscope. Maybe there’s something at a much smaller in there we ought to be seeing.”

The process of prepping what she believed to be the top ten samples for both machines took nearly two hours, time during which Penny found three very interesting but burried reports. She waited for Anne to complete her scans and looks at the molecular structure before clearing her throat.

“Hmm? Oh, yes, Penny. Sorry if you’ve been trying to get my attention. This is facscinating. I’ll show you everything if you go ahead and tell me what you’ve found.”

“Okay, but I don’t think you’re gonna like one of the things I spotted. Pull your chair over and take a look.”

Anne complied and Penny brought up a small article from a blog she’d discovered. The name of the blog was the GMNewsTruth. It appeared to be a one-person effort and was filled with mostly scare mongering articles and half-truths about genetically modified foods and animals. Before Penny clicked on the piece she wanted Anne glimpsed the titles of three other entries:

- GMO Killed Elvis—We have the proof!
- Fast Food Burgers = Fast Death
- Worried? You should be—growth hormones in fast food beef will kill your daughter before she’s fifty!

It was, however, the fourth one down that Penny clicked:

- Illegal testing lab in our back yard! NY Beware!!!

Though just two paragraphs in length, the blog entry stated that a covert GM test facility had been set up in the woods of northern New York State by “rogue federal agencies (to be named later)” and they were supposed to be working on some way to make standard, typically non-GM foods into “agents of death for our foreign enemies!”

It was enough to make the normal person snort with derision, but the two places mentioned were quite close to Bombay, those being Hogansburg and Fort Covington.

“Well?”

Anne sighed. “Well, indeed! That part about the bypass road from Highway 37 being closed to all but ‘approved local traffic’ is bothersome to say the least.”

“Yeah. Well, take a look at these other two articles. Again, they are both pretty skimpy but there’s something not quite right going on.”

Anne read the first one. It also came from a blogger but was a bit less “everything is going to kill you if it already hasn’t” and more flat and factual.

Crops Burned as Season Begins

A mysterious phenomena occured last evening at about one hour before sundown outside the small community of South Dundas in Ontario, Canada. Reports of three fields flashing into flames over less than a two-minute period were reported, but local police in Morrisburg, the closest town with a police office, told the farmers it was lightning and to forget about it.

This reporter might agree if it weren’t for the fact that just two days before, during a blue sky with zero winds day, a pair of fields nineteen miles east of the small town of Smith Falls, also in Ontario, had been overrun by flying insects. They, too, were left scorched and black before midnight came and the insects disappeared.

“I’m really not liking this at all,” Anne stated while Penny brought up her third find. It was a “On The Lighter Side” piece from the weekly newspaper of Sudbury, yet another Ontario, Canada, town.

Farmers Say The Weirdest Stuff

Pierre LaRoq from out past 2nd Avenue about where it hits Kingsway called in a couple days ago with a report of a dark swarm of flying bugs. "Locusts and out to reap retribution for mankind killing Jesus," he insisted. When asked how he knew this, his reply was, "There were hundreds of little stars popping up where they flew. They headed east all the time with little stars coming and going. It was God's light show." As we said, Weird!

"Let's put those up on a map," Anne suggested. She brought up a map program on her own computer and had Penny read out the names of the places mentioned. Once they had been marked with red circles she sent it to the printer. When it came out she brought it to the table.

"Isn't that interesting?" she asked.

"I'd say more than a coincidence. Gee!"

They were looking at a map of the upper half of the United States and lower portion of Canada from about Michigan to Maine. As Anne took a straight edge ruller and a red felt tip pen, she drew lines from one point to the next

It wasn't an absolutely straight line but it went nearly due east, bent down a little and still mostly to the east ending at Bombay.

"I wonder if there are any other things we might find farther west of that Sudbury place or east of Bombay?" Anne was tapping the capped marker against her front teeth. "Curiouser and curiouser!"

"Yeah," agreed Penny.

Anne sighed. "Well, come take a look at what the million dollar equipment found."

After looking at more than twenty screens of extreme closeup views of bits and pieces taken from the wounds, she looked at Anne. "What is it?"

"Just like back in 1962, Penny. We're being invaded by the beetles!"

CHAPTER 4 /

THE TRACE IT TRIP

AS SOON AS Anne suggested that she and Penny be allowed to go into the field, Quimby became suspicious.

“You generally fight me tooth and nail on my suggested field trips, Anne. What’s different now?”

Anne sighed. “We have beetles that could be as much as one-third the size of the ones your agents managed to capture and squish. All flat like they are means we can’t even tell which of the four-hundred-thousand beetles these are!”

It was true. The day before a bell had sounded in the lab announcing something new had been added to the collection of samples still held below them. When the small unmarked jar came up both ladies were not too surprised to find the remains of between six and ten insects. As they had already discovered, they were members of the beetle family.

“From those mangled samples we were able to determine that a genetic change is not evident, but that several proteins and at least a half dozen amino acids that are definitely not part of this insect’s diet are in what might be the digestive remains. And, that means that they are either eating something that is doing this to them, or they have eaten something that is changing the way they digest their food.”

Narz stood there looking at her like a seven year old sitting in on a university lecture. He was obviously hearing the words but he just didn’t have the ability to make sense of them.

Seeing his evident confusion, Anne added, “Your guys messed up the samples so badly that we really can’t figure out what is going on. Assuming these are from the swarm

that did go bang, I’d say they’re lucky the things didn’t explode on them! Penny and I need to go get our own samples, assuming there are more to be found, and to try to trace back the path these things took. Understand?”

Nodding, Narz said, “Now I do. Where will you go and how many men do I need to detail for you?”

Her head sank to her chest as she sought to find the words. “Quimby? About the last thing we need is for more of your ham-fisted field agents to be out there. My goodness, we’ll need to be as casual and inconspicuous about this as possible. Can you imagine the information we’ll get out of, oh let’s say a farmer’s wife in a grocery store when we show up with your men in black brigade standing behind us looking like, well, federal agents?”

“I get it! What about transportation?”

“Ah, that. Well,” Anne said looking around, “we need to have one of your soccer mom vans, but outfitted with several of the things we have here in the lab.” She smiled.

“Such as...?”

“The portable version of the SwiftScope we have, a spectroanalyzer, a centrifuge, a small 12-volt freezer and a few other essentials. I have a list,” and he handed a two-page document to the FBI man.

“Where are you going?” he inquired as he perused the list. “And, what is vital and what isn’t?”

“Items one through nine are vital. The rest are *nearly* mandatory. As much as we would like to go all the way out west to check the first reported sighting of little exploding insects,” she replied watching as his head snapped up, a look of deep concern on it at *that* bit of news, “my guess is that this little article we downloaded a half hour ago. Want to see?”

He nodded cautiously, so she handed it to him.

Crops Eradicated on Ministry Order

SOUTH DUNDAS, ONTARIO - Two local farmers who grow rye for Canada's distilling industry were alarmed yesterday when government agents told them their crops were infected with a type of blight that needed to be totally eradicated. The only effective method they were told was by burying their fields.

Although both families received immediate checks from Ottawa, evidently in amounts greater than the actual value of their crops, they were informed that they must leave their fields fallow for one year.

More on this if we hear anything.

Anne took the paper from Quimby's limp hands. He looked up at her. "Crap!"

"Yes, Quimby. Exactly that. And, as you might be able to see from this map—" she handed him the printout from the previous day, "—it is pretty much a straight line east from South Dundas to Bombay. Oh, and the interesting thing is there have been zero reports of any further exploding beetles east of there. Funny that."

"Not very, Anne. Not very. Okay," he took a deep breath, "the van will be here tomorrow morning. You and Penny will have to accept at least one agent. He will drive and be your bodyguard in case of any trouble. You will be in contact with me every thirty minutes and I will be standing by to fly in and pick you three up if necessary."

"Fine," she said in a semi-defeated tone. "Where will you be?"

He looked at her map and poked a finger down. "There. Massena. It's on our side of the border and half way

between this Dundas place and Bombay which is where I suspect you will end up. I'll let your driver know that he is to take you as close as we are allowed."

"Sometimes, Agent Narz, you can almost act like a human being," she told him.

The next morning she headed to the Shopton Regional Airport where she, Penny and Quimby Narz took the agency's sleek helicopter to Massena. A van containing the requested equipment and one large and slightly grumpy field agent waited for them.

They had to backtrack to the east before they crossed into Canada and headed west to South Dundas. Anne used the forty minute drive to explain to Penny, and their driver, what she hoped to accomplish.

"So," Penny recounted, "we need to let the farmer know we're there and see if he will let us prowl his fields to try to find some of the dead beetles."

"Basically, that's it."

"We're just about there, Ms. Boone," the agent announced. "Want me to just drive right up?"

Anne was looking around. She sighed. "No, Dwayne. Look. All the surrounding fields have been scorched to the ground. Looks like someone got here before us."

She tried to think what to do while the van made a wide U-turn in the empty road.

"Head back to Highway 31 and turn right toward the border, not up to Williamsburg. We passed a small road called Glenn something. I want to see if our bugs landed there or any of them dropped out for a rest. It's due east of here."

When they got several hundred feet down what turned out to be Glenn-Becker Road they stopped and Anne and

Penny got out. There was a green field to their right filled with short grain stalks that appeared to have been nibbled quite severely.

Withing fifteen feet of the field edge Anne found what she had hoped for. Several hundred small beetles, with black heads and reddish bodies were there. Many were dead and their bodies had become more of a brick color, but there were at least six live specimens that she quickly, but carefully, scooped into sample jars.

Five minutes later they were back in the van and she climbed into the back where the equipment was set up in a rack on one side.

“Penny? Call Quimby and tell him where we are and that I’ve found bugs. I’ll let him know at the next schedule call if they are our special beetles.”

Anne carefully took one of the dead beetles out, set it on a disposable clean work sheet and got out a set of small surgical instruments. Donning both a protective face shield as well as a Kevlar® throat-to-waist apron, she took the tweezers and held down the body while she punctured the top of it with a tiny scalpel. There was an immediate release of some sort of noxious gas that she believed she recognized as a combination of decomposition and methane. It wafted away quickly and she continued her exam.

In seconds the beetle had been divided in half and she picked up one half and set it under the lens of the portable SwiftScope.

Penny climbed between the rear seats and looked over Anne’s shoulder. “I’m not a bug expert, but that looks very odd to me,” she said.

“Me, too. Everything back there had been compacted by the pressure of the gas that built up. I’ve got to get another of these into the spectroscope before I pierce the body but

I’m starting to believe that something inside or outside these beetles has turned them into methane-producing aerial bombs.”

“But, why would anyone do that, Ms. Boone?” the agent asked from the front seat.

“Don’t know. Hopefully we’ll find out, but for now I need to take closer looks at these specimens.”

The analysis of the gas proved to be both methane as well as a form of hydrozine. The latter is highly explosive all on its own and is used as a mono-propellant in some rockets where it is necessary to carry only one fuel and no oxidizer.

“That hydrozine explains the explosive nature of these. It’s unstable to begin with, but put it in something and bash that into another something and you get *boom!*”

After apologizing to one of her live samples for what she was about to do, she placed it into a sealed container and opened it up so the spectroanalysis could occur. Like the dead beetle, the—formerly—live one was filled with hydrozine and a small amount of methane. But, the hydrozine appeared to be more stable in that specimen. The one notable difference between the live and dead samples was the presence of a large amount of vegetative matter in the digestive tract of the live one.

“Maybe they aren’t so explosive when they are full, but let them get hungry and they turn into flying bombs. Let’s get back to Massena, Dwayne.”

She explained what they had discovered to Quimby as they all sat having sandwiches in the shade of small terminal and office building at the airport.

“What’s next?” he inquired hoping he wasn’t about to hear her say she wanted to go to Bombay.

“I want to go into Bombay. I need to have you clear that

for us, and do it fast because according to my watch we're got about three hours before you need to whisk me back to Shopton."

Ten minutes later he was shaking his head. "It's a no go, Anne. I spoke with the guards at the gate on this side, just off Highway 37, and they outright refused. They finally transferred me to the office of the station manager and he said nobody is allowed in until they have, and I quote, 'orders from the President in our hands!' End quote."

Anne laughed. "I guess that puts lie to the story of this being a Canadian facility," she said noting Quimby's face turn crimson. "Caught you in another lie, didn't I?" she asked.

"Not me, Anne. I'm just the messenger here. So, what will you do?"

I don't know about Penny, and I can't order Dwayne to take me there, but I'm going to Bombay even if I have to hitchhike. It would be nicer to have some cooperation, though."

It was decided that Dwayne could drive them to the gate, but as soon as they were refused entry he was to bring them back.

They pulled off of Highway 37 onto a small 2-lane road marked as Highway 97. They drove about a mile before coming to a guard station and set of bollards crossing the asphalt. It all sat across the road from a house with a bright blue roof with at least a dozen cars in its large driveway and side parking area.

"This is a private facility," the guard announced as he trudged over to the van.

"FBI," Anne said showing him her identification.

The guard snorted. "Yeah, right. The FBI called a while

ago and we told them they couldn't come in. So, you either are stupid or you ain't FBI. Either case, scram!" He turned away as if that settled the matter.

Anne, furious now, shoved the van door open and jumped out. "You listen here, buster," she yelled. "We're investigating the deaths you had up here so the least you can do is cooperate. God! We're on the same team—"

That was when the first shot rang out.

A second guard had jumped from the booth and taken a shot at Anne's feet.

The next thing she knew she was being pushed to the ground and another shot rang out, this one from very close to her left ear.

"We're the FBI," bellowed their agent, Dwayne. "Hold the damn fire!"

There was a moaning of pain coming from the second guard, the one taking the first shot.

Penny helped Anne to her feet as about ten armed men came running from the house and down the driveway. Anne looked at her companion in time to see the .45 service pistol being put back into her purse.

Penny smiled. "Got issued that a year ago overseas and have all the permits. And the training. Don't worry. I only hit the guy in his thigh."

The contingent from the house arrived and identifications were given. Dwayne took one man aside and they spoke for a moment before returning to the rest. The injured man was stripped of his pants, a compress was applied to the wound and a station wagon pulled up. He was loaded into it and they raced away toward the larger highway.

"You'd best come to the office," one man who identified

himself and the Agent in Command told Anne and Penny. “And, you,” he pointed at Dwayne, “had better had a good reason for breaking protocol! It’s all gonna hit the fan now!”

Once in the house, that had definitely never been a house—it was built like a small fortress with numerous offices on the ground floor and who knows what above them—Anne and Penny were shown into the commander’s office.

“You were told to stay away. Why didn’t you just stay away?” His questions were almost plaintive.

“Listen, I’m agent Barbara Boone and—”

“That’s B.S. You’re Anne Swift. I don’t know who your sharpshooter here is, but you work down in the Shopton lab. So, now that we’ve got that out of the way, what was going through your mind coming here?”

“You had several people, some livestock and a bunch of birds all get killed by exploding insects. Beetles to be exact. Beetles that for some reason either were genetically altered to make hydrozine and methane, or were fed something that made them produce those. You run a GM facility here, unknown to the good people of New York or possibly even the locals, and you are trying to stymie my investigation, one ordered by the FBI, to find out why they died.” She glared at him.

He tried to glare back but blinked and sat back.

“Okay. You’re FBI and we’re FBI. Technically that puts us on the same team, but just like you evidently work in a secret lab—and don’t look at me like that. It’s not common knowledge and I won’t let it get out. Anyway, like you have your lab, we have ours. Or rather, we protect this large-scale lab. To be completely honest even I don’t know all that goes on in there. I can tell you one thing.

“An experiment was created to try to see if it is possible

to turn hungry insects into crop killing machines. Locusts on demand, but not locusts, see? Let them loose at one point, like from a plane, and they head in a predetermined direction to the nearest crops. They get there, they eat and they explode destroying the remaining crops.”

“Something went wrong, though. Didn’t it?”

“Yeah,” he said starting to take out a cigarette then thinking better of it. The pack slid into his pocket again. “The Canadian government let us use a field of wheat up in Saskatchewan. Problem is the bugs ate and just flew on. East, always to the east.”

“They can be, uh, programmed?” Penny asked.

“Someone found that they get all fixed on a magnetic thing. Expose them to magnetism in one direction and they want to keep flying that way. Anyway, they were seen passing south of Winnipeg five days later. A couple reports of little explosions in the air, but mostly at night when they can’t see so good.

“Anyway, we heard nothing more until they got into Ontario and then we had a couple sightings and some serious crop damage. I guess you’ve already read the reports we couldn’t get pulled of the Internet.”

Anne nodded.

“So, I hear they also follow something called a fairy moan and so—”

“Pheromone, with a ‘p-h’ at the beginning. It’s a scent hormone,” Penny supplied.

“Yeah. Right. Fine.” He stared her a moment before continuing. “So, the station here sent up a plane with that smell stuff and released a trail of it back to here. It worked.” He looked somewhat sad now.

“It worked too well, isn’t that right?” Anne inquired.

“Worked so well they all came home, probably really hungry, and dived right in on whatever you have growing out there. Unfortunately, you have people and animals who were also out there and they took the brunt of it all. What infuriates me is the coverup. I’m not in the business of releasing sensitive information. I’m a scientist who is paid to get to the bottom of things that kill people.”

She sat back, arms crossed. Very little more was said and she and Penny left when Quimby drove up to the house and picked them up five minutes later.

Before leaving Anne asked, “What happened to the beetles?”

“Far as we know they were totally spent and died within a day of getting back here.”

“I’m sorry things turned out like this,” Quimby told them as they walked to the front door.

Anne was furious. “How dare you come here and stand in front of Penny and me and tell us, ‘Oops. Sorry that I never told you about the GenMod project or that the FBI has armed men guarding it!’ You miserable—” she couldn’t get anything more out.

“Agent Narz,” Penny spoke up. “I believe that my relationship with your agency has come to a conclusion. I will miss Anne, here, but as I have now been shot at by supposed friendly fire I find that my life is worth more to me than any of this. There is an old song about taking your job and putting it where the sun doesn’t shine. You can do that!”

Almost sputtering, Anne exclaimed, “Count me as gone as well, Agent Narz. We could have been killed all because you and your kind adhere to some sort of secret code that places your selfish interests above the safety of the people you are supposed to be protecting. Good-bye!”

With that, Anne and Penny dropped their badges on the ground and walked out of the building.

Dwayne took them to the airport in the van and they flew out in the helicopter, leaving the other agents behind.

Anne was so furious about how her relationship with the FBI secret program, and especially Agent Narz, had deteriorated, that she refused to take five calls from him late that afternoon.

She also refused to speak with Harlan Ames the next day who she held partially responsible as he was the only one in the entirety of Enterprises who knew of her work with the FBI.

Her anger was so deep that the one time she saw Harlan downtown on a Saturday afternoon three weeks later, she purposely crossed the street and did not acknowledge him hailing her.

He felt hurt, and knew something bad had happened between Anne and Quimby, but could not find out what it was.

* * * * *

Anne Swift headed out the kitchen door to go shopping. There was so much to buy what with a big backyard barbecue they were putting on for Tom and his best friend, Bud, after their successful return from exploring a highly radioactive cave in Africa.

As she closed the door, she heard her cell phone ring. It was sitting on the counter in the house, right where she left it, and she considered going back in to get it. It stopped after two rings.

It had not rung for a month.

She stood there for another ten seconds and then heard

the distinctive ringtone that told her a very important call was coming in from FBI Agent Quimby Narz.

Without a second thought, she muttered, “Bite me, Quimby,” before walking outside with the phone that she shoved down the inside of the garbage can, and got into her car and drove away for a pleasant day of shopping.

ANNE SWIFT will be back soon in:

The Alien Anticoagulant Anomaly

