



THE ANNE SWIFT INVESTIGATES SERIES

Anne Swift: Molecular Biologist Detective

The Alien Anticoagulant Anomaly

By T. Edward Fox

Has upstate New York been invaded by little green men?

That's what some people are saying in the small town or Gergenville, near the border with Canada. Folks say that bright lights in the sky one night foreshadowed the deaths of ten people and fifty goats on two neighboring farms.

Nobody knows what really happened, but they all bled to death, their blood lacking any coagulants so the slightest cut would have made them bleed and bleed and bleed.

Anne Swift and her favorite scientific cohort, Wiley Oswaldt, are called in to investigate whether this could be the start of an alien invasion where certain death awaits anyone who comes in contact with them.

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This book is dedicated to anyone with any type of blood-borne disease, or blood-based health issue, especially those with hemophilia. As someone whose blood stops within seconds of being cut, I can only image the horror you must feel if you ever look down and see that you've opened some kind of wound. Keep taking that clotting factor!

THE ANNE SWIFT INVESTIGATES SERIES

Anne Swift and the Alien Anticoagulant Anomaly**FOREWORD**

Anne has been involved in many, many more adventures than we will possibly ever hear about. Many of them have been life-or-death matters and a number have been almost beyond belief, but she has never been pulled into something that seems as crazy as this time.

We've all seen the movies and television programs about strange alien beings coming to Earth and doing everything from making long distance calls to wiping mankind from the face of the globe. Funny thing about that last one is that they never seem to harm a large group of animals. Maybe the occasional dog (*20 Million Miles to Earth*) or a cow. But, they devote an extraordinary amount of time attacking us.

In real life only a few people living in rural areas who have been taken and probed, plus a lot of people who hang around Roswell, New Mexico, seem to truly believe that aliens have landed and might just be among us.

If they have, do you suppose that there would be zero health problems if we came into direct contact? I mean, look at what happened to the Martians in *War of The Worlds*!

Victor Appleton II

CHAPTER 1 /**LIGHTS, NO CAMERAS, AND... ALIENS?**

IT MIGHT have been a better start to her day had Anne Swift—devoted wife to Damon Swift, the renowned the inventor, and loving mother to Tom and Sandy, one equally famous to his father and the other a vibrant, blond teenager—not decided to come back into the house to retrieve her cell phone.

Her intention was to slip down to the store for a little grocery shopping and then to have lunch with a dear friend, and to do it all without the distraction a phone might bring. Her husband was at work at the family company, Swift Enterprises, Tom was doing half days at Shopton High School working with their Science department to update the school's curriculum, and half with his father, and Sandy was a junior at the same school for the next five hours. But, as she started the car her conscience got the better of her.

It was the age-old "what if X happens to child Y and he/she can't get a message to me?" guilt parents have that made her shut the engine off, unlock the side door and go back to pick up the phone. There had been no emergency messages in the two minutes she'd been out of earshot, so she dropped it into her purse and walked back outside.

Once in the car and driving down the tree-shaded street of the neighborhood she and Damon had called home for more than eighteen years, her mental list review of the things she needed to purchase was interrupted by a fluttering ringing sound from her purse.

Though startled by the sound, her first thought was actually, "Ah... crap!"

The ringtone was one she had not heard for almost one

year, not since a previous secret assignment she had been on as part of her work for the FBI had gone horribly wrong and she and a coworker had been shot at by FBI agents protecting a secret genetic modification project. They both had severed their relationship with the FBI and, after a few unanswered attempts to contact her, the calls had stopped.

It had been a wonderful year only marred by her strained relationship with the head of Security at her husband's company. As the only person outside of the FBI who knew of her double life, Harlan Ames had been the recipient of her anger fallout. Only a few curt words had passed between them in over eleven months.

Without notification, a small package had been hand delivered to the Swift home the week before. She signed for it and went to the kitchen to open it. Inside was a cell phone, just like the one she had purposely trashed that previous year. Her anger at the FBI and even at Harlan had dissipated to the point she figured she might as well hang onto the thing.

The phone had now stopped ringing and Anne was getting ready to relax, when her normal ringtone sounded. She pulled over and took out the phone. Seeing who the caller ID registered she was about to drop it back in her purse when she decided to answer it.

"Hello, Harlan," she said in a monotone voice. "If Quimby Narz has put you up to calling me, hang up now."

"No, Anne. I mean he did call me a half hour ago but he didn't tell me to call you. I need you to listen to this, Anne. I honestly did not know what happened on that assignment. He would never tell me and you and I haven't exactly been on speaking terms since then. I only found out about it today. Oh, Anne. I am so sorry for what happened. It took me a half hour just to calm down enough to make this call."

Anne hesitated for about ten seconds before saying, "If you are telling me the truth, then I owe you an apology, Harlan. But, only *if*. Penny Cooper and I could have lost our lives that day and all because one hand of the FBI was protecting the other. *Nobody was protecting us!*"

Harlan sighed. "I know. There was a lot of fallout from that day. You won't know this, but Narz was reprimanded and transferred to Omaha. And, from what he told me today, the head of the branch responsible for that project and for you being shot at was fired. Ditto the agent at the gate who shot at you two."

Anne snorted. "Because he shot at us, or because he missed?"

Ames let out a single chuckle. "Who knows. Listen, Anne, I really do apologize for everything. I only hope we can go back to being friends. At some point."

"How about today, Harlan?"

"Great! Can you come out and have a cup with me at The Glass Cat? I could really use a good cup of espresso and one of Moshan Prandit's pastries."

They met fifteen minutes later. As they sat sipping and eating, Anne asked, "An idea why Quimby might be trying to get in touch with me today?"

Harlan shook his head as he wiped away a few pastry crumbs. "Same flutter followed by the *Stairway to Heaven* ringtone?"

Anne nodded.

"Might not be him. The Agency might have taken his phone away and given it to the new area managing Agent. Her name, by the way, is Annabelle Morganstern. She's a no-nonsense thirty something with ideas that she can work her way up to being head of the FBI by the time she's forty."

I hear she has already had five of the seven agents in the area quit or request transfers. She is not liked by most.”

Anne’s phone began playing the first four bars of *Stairway to Heaven*. Looking at Ames, she pulled the phone from her purse and pressed the TALK button. “If this is about anything to do with a former occupation of mine, get off the line. I consider any future contact to be harassment, If this has to do with anything else, you have ten seconds to state your case before I hang up. Go!”

“Mrs. Damon Swift? This is Annabelle Morganstern with the Federal Bureau of Investigation. We need to talk and I need to have you meet me at the bank. Do you understand?”

“That was eleven seconds and good-bye!” Anne hung up. “Guess who,” she said to Ames dropping the phone on the table.

Her phone rang again with the same ringtone. She tried to shove it across to Harlan but he raised both of his hands and shook his head. “Not my job.” She dropped it back in her purse. “Not after Bombay!”

She referred to an assignment a year earlier where she had been investigating a case where people died when swarmed by exploding insects. Not only had she been shot at by an FBI agent, she discovered the truth behind the insects had its roots in the FBI as well. She had quit then and there!

Five minutes later a nondescript dark gray car pulled up in front of the coffee house and a woman in a nondescript gray suit got out. She walked purposefully into the shop and walked right over to Anne.

“I am not in the habit of being hung up on by employees,” she said, sitting down.

Anne’s face turned red. “Listen to me, you incredibly rude

and poorly dressed woman. I do *not* work for you. I do *not* work for your agency. I quit and I am out of business and if you can’t get that through your rather masculine haircut and into your tiny brain, then just try pushing this matter!”

With that, Anne got up, said, “Sorry, Harl,” and gave the woman a glare before walking out.

The woman started to rise but Harlan placed a large hand on her forearm and squeezed it hard enough to make her wince. “Don’t even try to bully her. From what I hear from my contacts, you are walking a tightrope between demotion and outright dismissal as it is. Screw this up and you’ll be gone to some place in Alaska.”

He stood up and also left.

Annabelle Morganstern sat in The Glass Cat for ten minutes, considering her options. There were very few of them and she knew it.

“Mrs. Swift. I got off on the wrong foot yesterday,” the voice said pleasantly over the phone. “I am used to dealing with men so my approach has to be one of strength. I misread the situation with you. May we speak in private sometime today?”

Anne thought about hanging up, but her curiosity was getting the better of her. “The Glass Cat in half an hour. You’re buying. It gets you five minutes.” She did hang up after that.

Ms. Morganstern was waiting when she arrived. She already had an iced mocha latte and boysenberry Danish—Anne’s order from the previous day—waiting.

As she sat down, Anne stated, “My patience is limited. Tell me what this is about and please do it in as few words as possible. At the first sign of bullying, or a lie, or a stall or

a threat, I am gone. Understand?”

The agent nodded. She slid a single page over the table to Anne.

“There is a small town just over the Canadian border called Gergenville. Some very bad things happened up there a few days ago and the U.S. Government wants to make certain that it doesn’t come across the border.”

“Don’t you mean to tell me that the Government wants to figure this out and help the people up in Canada *at the same time* we ensure it does not spread or travel or move or whatever?”

“Well, uh, of course. If that is what you want to hear, then yes. Anyway, the people up there witnessed some very strange lights six nights ago. And, no, it wasn’t the Northern Lights. It was bright lights practically shining down on the outskirts of the small town. Many of the people up there thought they might be flying saucers, but they went away after an hour and didn’t come back the next two nights.”

“So?”

“The ‘so’ of it is that beginning two days after the lights, a couple people died. Bled to death. The local Mountie up there also found a small herd of goats in a nearby field that had also bled to death. But, none of the victims had any wounds. Nothing to indicate they had been attacked.”

“Did it stop at those fatalities?”

“No. Since then a total of ten people and over four dozen goats have died.” The agent sat back and looked at Anne to judge her feelings. “We need you. You and Dr. Oswaldt. None of the other teams and labs have the bandwidth right now, and none is as close as yours. Your track record is amazing compared to everyone else we have. Truly amazing. We need you.”

Anne thought for a few minutes. Finally, she asked, “Did anyone get a picture of these lights? Fuzzy cellphone or high-definition with motion stability? An old Brownie box camera? Anything?”

“Nothing that has been reported. The people were so transfixed that nobody thought to get out a camera. All they have up there is an industrial freezer with ten human and a bunch of goat bodies in it waiting for someone to autopsy them to find out what happened.”

Looking at the agent, Anne pursed her lips before inquiring, “Do you know *all* of the agreement I had? All the special ‘I don’t do that’ conditions?”

Agent Morganstern nodded. “I do but I am hoping that you will break some of those rules on this. I.. we feel it is time your husband knew about this. Don’t you think so?” She gave Anne a smile that spoke of malevolence.

Standing up, Anne took out her phone and dialed a number. “Hello, Harlan? Can you call the FBI and have this Morganstern person dismissed?... Yeah, with a lot of emphasis on making her life as miserable as possible. She has just threatened me with telling Damon about my second life... Uh-huh. No doubt about it. She is even turning incredibly pale on hearing me tell you this. I’ll stay here for five minutes. Think it can happen before then?... Good. Bye!”

She sat back down. “Now, you miserable— now Miss Annabelle Morganstern. You are going to find out that it is not wise to threaten me and don’t try to deny it! Your little ‘isn’t it time’ speech said enough about the sort of person you are. I would no more work for the likes of you than I would kill one of my own children!” She crossed her arms over her chest and glared at the agent.

Four minutes later agent Morganstern’s own phone

beeped. She jumped and turned white, barely able to get it opened. “Yes.” Her voice squeaked, much to Anne’s delight.

She listened for almost a minute, wincing visibly several times. Finally she said, “Yes. I will,” and hung up. “I am to apologize to you for any inconvenience any dealings with me might have caused. I am also to guarantee that no contact will be made with your family or anyone else regarding you. My replacement will be here this evening and will want to meet you at the Bank, if you can please make that appointment at about ten tomorrow morning.”

She glanced out the window in time to see a black van pull up outside. With a shuddering sigh Annabelle Morganstern rose and walked out the door, climbed into the back of the van, never to be seen by Anne Swift again.

The next day was Saturday. After getting the family off for the day—Damon and Tom to Enterprises and Sandy off for an all-girls sailing day on Lake Carlopa with her school friends—Anne drove downtown and parked in a spot right in front of the bank. The parking meter changed from a flashing red **NO PARKING** indicator to displaying a working meter with two hours of remaining time.

She smiled realizing that she had never removed the magic little fob—disguised as a customer loyalty tag for a chain of supermarkets—that made the magic meter do this little trick from her keys. Anne walked up the three steps and into the bank. She crossed to the safe deposit box desk, signed in and was taken back to the vault by a pleasant young Chinese woman.

“It is nice to see you again,” the woman told her in a low voice.

Anne walked to the back of the vault and placed her key into the lock of a large box on one of the upper rows. The other woman nodded to her, placed her key into the other

lock and then turned both keys. Without another word between them, the bank employee left.

Anne turned her own key back into position and stepped back to let the entire wall of boxes swing out and back, revealing a hall behind. She pulled out her key, stepped in and tapped a small pad on a side wall. The box wall slid back into place and the lights came up around her. A small device on the same wall as the pad made a slight ping sound and a credit card sized plastic ID card came out of a slot.

She pocketed it. It would allow her fast entrance to the secret world of underground labs that resided below the Merchant’s & Co. Bank for the duration of this assignment. *If* she took it!

She went down the thirty-two stairs and walked down the corridor to the door of what used to be her lab. It was unlocked so she stepped inside.

“Hello, Anne.”

Her blood froze. It was Quimby Narz. Her first thought was to kick him and leave, but she could see the look on his face. It spelled trouble and pain.

“Agent Narz,” she acknowledged somewhat coolly. “Imagine seeing you here.” She did not take his offered hand.

He sat down on a low stool and indicated a chair to his left. He began with an apology to her for what had happened eleven months earlier. It was sincere and she could tell he meant every word of it. It had not been the first time he had been ordered by very high sources to withhold information from her and others.

“So, what is this about bleeding goats?” she inquired with a sigh.

He gave her mostly the same information that Agent

Morganstern had, but he had additional news. “We have five of the goats and two of the bodies in the isolation vault here in Shopton.” Seeing her surprise he added, “Even if you had said no, Wiley was getting bored and told us he would come in as long as it was understood this wasn’t the restart of an ongoing relationship. I’ve assured him that this is a one-off unless he tells me otherwise.”

Wiley Oswaldt had been one of Anne’s favorite work partners. Older by at least thirty years and fighting cancer the year before, he had also tendered his resignation when Anne quit. The last thing she had heard, he was in remission and getting his health back.

“For me as well,” Anne told him, sternly. He nodded his understanding. “And, this time absolutely no field work. When does Wiley arrive?”

“Ten minutes before you got here,” he told her. “He’s in the break room filling the refrigerator with his own food. He still hates our frozen stuff and is on some special macrobiotic diet, whatever that is. Before he comes in, I want to tell you a few things about what has been happening with me and with the lab system this past year. May I?”

“Okay.” Anne took a seat and tried to open her mind.

“After the shooting and your departure, I had a small breakdown. It was the proverbial straw for this camel. I wasn’t sleeping and everything in this district fell apart as I did the same. Agent Morganstern was assigned and I was sent off to Nebraska to recoup while handing a small team of three agents with nothing more thrilling than the occasional border crossing by a Canadian with a gun or an illegal prescription hidden in someone’s trunk. Five months ago I was declared fit for regular duty, but there was no place to go. The agency has been waiting for Morganstern to slip and do something stupid, which I guess she did with

you. Anyway, if you will give me one more chance I will promise to keep you safe and to let you and Wiley know about everything going on. Even if it gets me into trouble. I promise!”

She shrugged and nodded. “Are you okay now,” she asked in genuine concern.

“Sure. Eligible for retirement in eighteen months but morally determined to never again stifle the truth. And, speaking of truth, I can’t guarantee zero field work on this. You need to go up to Canada to find out what the RCMP has done with the rest of the bodies.”

She scowled. Not at the idea of a short trip, but because of what seemed to be a growing mystery. “The rest of the bodies? Do you mean after you got the two humans and five goats the rest disappeared?”

“Not exactly disappeared. But we’re being told they are currently ‘unavailable.’”

Anne smiled at him. Danger she hated, but a mystery was just what she needed. “Let’s get Wiley in here and get started!”

CHAPTER 2 /

IT'S AN ALIEN!

BY THE following day, Anne and Wiley Oswaldt felt as if they had never been gone. Both were thrilled to see that some of the lab's older equipment had been updated or outright replaced and that several other devices were now installed, but that everything was in its proper place.

Among the first things they did was to autopsy all the goats. Anne wanted to see if the initial findings had been correct, so she totally shaved the first one to make a skin examination easier. Moments later she was glad she had taken the extra half hour. Although they were small, the goat had more than five-dozen small slit-like cuts on its chest, belly and lower legs. Each of them showed signs of having bled. There were a myriad of cut and ruptured capillaries and blood vessels around each slit. It was curious, but nothing Anne felt could have led to them bleeding out and dying.

After slicing into the abdomen of the first one she could see that there was still a lot of blood left in the animal, just not in its circulatory system. The entire abdominal cavity was flooded with dark, sticky blood. She took several sizable samples and then drained the excess away.

Before continuing she asked Wiley to take the transfer one of the vials of goat blood. "Can you run a complete screen on this?"

"Everything? Toxicity screen, drug panels and the likes?"

"Yep. We've got no place to start so we might as well know absolutely everything about that blood," she told him as he set to work. The vial quickly disappeared into a small hatch and soon popped up in a sealed chamber next to his work

station.

She practically dissected the entire goat from hooves to ears over the next four hours trying to understand everything that had gone on inside the animal. It wasn't a pretty picture. From what she could discern the goat had probably begun bleeding internally and had soon dropped to the ground. That might explain the belly cuts, but not the precise nature of them, almost as if made by a scalpel.

Her head snapped up at that thought. She used the operating Waldoes—the mechanical arms and hands that she controlled from outside the isolation chamber in the lab—to take the top back off a large container that held the animal's hide. Placing one of the cuts under the remote camera in the chamber—now part of the upgrades to the SwiftScope super-high-power microscope and video enhancement system in the lab—she looked closely at the cut.

She picked up one of her scalpels from the operating table and brought it over to the hide, making an incision close to the original cut. A close examination showed them to be similar, but not exact.

Anne made a few notes and continued with the dissection. By four o'clock she was no closer to finding the root cause, so she spent twenty minutes making additional notes before bidding Wiley good-bye for the day.

"You run along, Annie," he told her with a twinkle in his eye. "I'm going to remain a few hours because I have an inkling of a suspicion about an idea of a notion that might or might not pan out. Tell you all about it tomorrow," he said giving her a shooing motion.

On her drive home, Anne stopped at the supermarket to pick up a flank steak to cook for dinner. She took one look at the meat counter and suddenly felt a slight revulsion. She

had seen enough raw meat for the day, so she purchased an assortment of vegetables and some quinoa to have that evening.

When she arrived on Monday morning it was to discover that Wiley had left her a note the night before:

Stayed until midnight Saturday and six hours Sunday. I'm sleeping at home, but have some real news for you. Let you know around 10:00 when I get in.

W

She went to the break room to fix some coffee where she found another note:

I made a single brew pot, Annie. It's in the fridge. I'll let you do that double brew magic. Save me a big mug! Should be in by ten.

W

The two of them had learned about double brewing coffee from a British colleague that consisted of brewing a pot of coffee as you would normally, then allowing it to cool, pouring it back into the coffee maker instead of water, and adding fresh grounds before re-brewing it. It made for an incredibly smooth yet rich and powerful cup of coffee, and it took a little getting used to, but it had become a staple for the lab whenever Anne or Wiley worked there.

She did the brewing and then took her mug back to the lab.

“I wonder what the old rascal found,” she said aloud. She only had to wait five minutes before he breezed in, saw that

she had the coffee and breezed back out and down the hall. When he returned, 24-oz. mug in hand, he had a smile on his face.

He gave her a small peck on the cheek, saying, “You looked so sad at having made no headway the other day that I thought I ought to finish the blood panels for you. Boy, did I find something, and nothing I expected!” He took a sip of his coffee, humming to himself.

Anne gently relieved him of his mug and held it behind her. “No more until you start telling me what you found!” She handed the mug back, having made her point.

“That goat—and I have to disclaim this a little because I only have the sample from one of them—but that goat bled out because of the most advanced case of hemophilia I have ever seen!” He nodded, triumphantly.

Anne was stunned.

“That’s practically impossible! We get clotting factors from goat blood, for goodness sake. I mean...” She was at a loss for words.

Wiley nodded. “Right. Mother Nature, in her wisdom, has made hemophilia almost impossible in our furry woodland and farm animals so they don’t get cut running through the brush and die from a scratch. But, this one did die from having precisely zero clotting factor.”

While Anne was digesting this, Wiley added, “I should tell you something else. And, this goes to any accidental contact I might have with this blood. I am a hemophiliac. About a four on a scale of one—not very bad—to ten—don’t use a blade razor! It should be no issue, and I went home last night and tested myself. Everything is looking good, but I am going to test twice a day just to be certain. I want you to know about this in case I do have a problem and poke myself doing a test and just keep bleeding.”

“I’ll get you to the hospital ASAP,” she promised, earning another peck on her left cheek.

Anne set to work with renewed vigor checking over numerous tissue samples under both the SwiftScope and the more powerful electron microscope. By mid afternoon she was ready to examine another body.

“Do I do another goat, Wiley, or should I go for one of the human bodies?”

He pushed the thin reading glasses that perpetually perched on his nose back up a little and pondered the matter. “Unless we know that these bodies need to be cleared so their families can claim them, I’d say another goat. But, now that I say that I wonder if Agent Narz ought to make that decision. Hmmm?”

Anne made the call.

“Unfortunately, I just heard that two of the deceased have been buried already, Anne,” he told her. “Three were cremated. You have those for as long as it takes before we do the switches.”

She had the remains of the first caprican victim removed, set the isolation chamber to self clean and sterilize itself, and then called up the body of a man who was supposed to have been among the first two humans to perish.

She attempted to draw blood from a major artery in the leg but came up practically empty, so she used scalpel to cut into the inner leg and into the artery. The needle hadn’t lied. There were scant traces of blood but nothing significant. She decided to take a sample of the artery for study and then turned to a fuller exam of the body.

Most of the body as in very good condition—for one that had been left outside overnight and then frozen and thawed out in her lab a week later. There were several cuts inside

the man’s mouth and a small gash on his left buttock—probably from when he fell to the ground—but she found nothing else until she examined the soles of his feet.

There, as with the goat, were a series of almost surgically-precise cuts. It was extremely curious. She tried her experiment with using her own scalpel and saw that the cuts were, again, similar but not close enough to say that it had been a scalpel. Anne asked Wiley to come check the cuts.

“Well, if I had to say it, I’d say that the cuts on that man’s feet were made with a scalpel, but not a modern, disposable one. You are not old enough to have worked with the old sharpen-them-yourself-before-use ones we had three decades ago. Those blades were about three times thicker and almost twice as deep from tip to back.”

“And, these cuts look like they were made with one of those old scalpels?”

“Or, something similar. Listen, before you go cutting into our guest here, can I ask you to do your microscopic magic and look as some of the separated blood components I did last night?”

“Certainly. What have you got and what are we looking for?”

“What I got is about fifty slides and microtomed tissue samples. What I’m looking for, using your delightful blue eyes, is any irregularity in cell structure.”

For the next two hours Anne, with Wiley alternately peering over her shoulder and trying to keep out of her way, placed slide after slide in the SwiftScope. Capable of providing a closeup view approximately half way between a powerful traditional microscope and her electron model, the real benefit was that the sample wasn’t bombarded with radiation and, therefore, kept its color, shape and in the

case of live tissue, it viability.

They saw pretty much what they both expected in the blood samples. Skin samples showed a small deviation from the norm with microscopic tears appearing between cells.

“That could explain blood loss but only if the victims were covered in blood,” she told her cohort. “I’ve got to call Quimby, again.”

When the agent answered, she asked him about the condition of the bodies. “Where they clean like this or where they all bloody?”

He promised to get back to her within the hour. When he did call back it was with incredible news.

“Anne. Each of the bodies was found covered in blood. Head to toe. The Mountie up there didn’t know what to do so he hired a local woman to come in and clean them up in case their families wanted to come view them.”

“Oh, that’s just great!” Anne replied sarcastically. “It’s a wonder she didn’t pump them full of glycerine or something like that to plump them back up! What were they thinking?”

“Well, uh, right. There’s nothing to be done now. The Mountie says she washed all of the blood and water down the drain and towed them off before dressing them in some clothes she had sitting around. So, any clues there have been burned according to Dudley Do-right. I’m sorry, Anne. But, I do have some interesting information from the RCMP man.”

“If it’s something like they all had smiles on their faces that she rearranged, spare me.”

“No. But get this. All the victims were found in a standing position. All of them. Humans and goats! Actually, standing and leaned against something like a fence or a bush or a tree.”

Anne huffed a few times. Finally she said, “I hate it when I make myself out to be a liar, but I’ve got to go up there, Quimby. At the very least to talk to our scrubber woman, but maybe to collect some evidence Sergeant Preston missed. Can you get me up there tomorrow morning?”

“Consider it done. See you out back at nine.”

The next day she arrived in the rear parking lot of the Bank to find Quimby’s minivan sitting there. As usual she couldn’t see in through the windows. They had some sort of coating that meant you could see out through them when using special glasses, but not inside—even with the glasses.

The passenger door popped open as she approached, and she climbed in. The aroma from the cup of coffee waiting in her cup holder went into her nostrils and forced her eyes open. She had spent most of the night tossing and turning while the questions she would want to ask paraded through her mind.

“We’re heading to the airport,” he told her, “and you’ll take our wonder copter up over the border. The flight has been given priority clearance and you will touch down right on the farm where the first two bodies were discovered. Oh,” he said as they pulled out and drove away, “some more news and possibly good for you, but bad for them. There were three more human deaths over the night. Two are on the same farm. All bleed outs and all covered with, presumably, their own inner fluids. I’ve made certain that the Mountie in charge doesn’t touch the bodies. The same goes for his washer woman. They are exactly where they were found, just covered up.”

The flight took less than a half hour and Anne soon found herself at a small farm about a mile from the town of Gergenville. A man dressed in a RCMP uniform, but looking as if it must be his father’s—he appeared to be about fifteen

—came out of the barn to meet her.

“Morning, ma’am. I’m RCMP Constable Bill Cavendish, ma’am. I suppose you’re the lady from The States I’m supposed to be expecting.” He looked at her hopefully.

Anne favored him with a slight smile as she silently hoped he didn’t use a redundant word repetition in every sentence. “Hello. My name is Barbara Boone,” she said giving him her code name,” and yes, I am the agent from the FBI. Would you like to see my identification?”

“Oh, gosh no, ma’am. I already have your picture on my facsimile machine back at my bedroom... I mean back at the office. It came through a little dark, but it sure looks just like you. Only, you’re not quite as dark.” He blushed as he realized that might not be a compliment.

Anne let it pass. “Comes from working inside,” she told him. “Let’s go see the victims, please.”

He showed her to the two bodies. A teenage boy and girl who had, from their state of undress, likely been using the barn for more than bucking hay. Both, as with the description of the previous victims, were in an almost standing position, leaning back against several blood-soaked bales.

“Other than the addition of this plastic tarp, can you assure me that nobody fooled with these bodies?” she asked somewhat more sharply than she intended. The Constable flinched a little but answered, “Yes ma’am, and no ma’am. Yes I’m sure about it and no, nobody touched them. I placed those sheets over them myself.”

A few seconds later a male voice came from behind them. “Agent Boone? I found this woman sneaking under the ‘do not cross’ tape out there!”

They both turned to see her helicopter pilot holding onto

the back of the coat of a small and strange-looking woman. Her face was narrow with small, beady eyes and a long nose. Anne would almost classify her look as “shrew-like.” She appeared to want to twist away and run off, but the grip the pilot had on her coat must have included the dirty brown dress she had on underneath. And, possibly some skin.

“Hey, Mrs., uh, Miss, uhh, Mizz Boone?” the Constable began in protest, “That’s Millie. She’s the one who helped me with cleaning up the others.”

Millie gave a satisfied nod. “That’s right. Did a nice job and all. Even them goats. They’re godless but didn’t deserve to die like that. You can’t fault me for not doing a good job, even on them goats!”

The Constable made a polite coughing noise toward Anne. He head-motioned, and she walked a few yards away. “Yes?”

In a whisper, he told her, “Millie’s just trying to help in a difficult situation. You oughtn’t to go too hard on her.”

“Then, who *ought* I to go hard on? You? Did you tell her to destroy evidence?”

She watched the young man blanch and gulp.

Nodding at the pilot, who released the strange little woman, Anne told her, “I’m FBI agent Boone, and the problem is that you washed away all the evidence we need to figure out what killed them. You contaminated the scene of what might be a murder investigation. Now, we’ll have an incredibly difficult time even figuring out what happened.”

“Ah, I can tell you what did that,” Millie told her giving another emphatic nod. “It were my people. My little star people.”

Anne narrowed her eyes. The woman was either quite

insane or just trying to get out of being in trouble. “What star people?” she asked slowly.

“Me and the others that came from up there,” the woman stated pointing to the underside of the roof of the barn. “Me and my people from the star system Dragule. Our planet’s called Hellifyno. We’re all the same, them and me. I’m an alien!”

CHAPTER 3 /

A KILLING FIELD OR TWO

ANNE DIDN’T know what to say. Her pilot, Robert, snorted and grabbed the woman’s coat again in case she attempted to dart away.

Constable Cavendish looked decidedly uncomfortable at hearing this woman’s proclamation. As if Anne’s last question to him hadn’t been enough—

Anne, made a decision. “Robert. Put her in one of the transport pods and freeze her. We have to get her to Area 51 quickly so they can dissect her to find out more about her home planet!”

Millie’s eye went wide with panic and she began to twist and struggle against Robert’s grip.

The Constable stepped forward, his eyes wide open, saying, “Miss Boone. Millie’s okay, she’s just a little confused. See, she’s been doing one of those role paying games with a few of the other old ladies in the area. It’s called *Planet Dragule* and I think that the ‘hell if I know’ place is a park or forest or something like that. It’s got aliens battling vampires in it!” He motioned Anne to come back to one side. “She’s a nice enough lady, just a bit confused. I’m sorry and I’ll take responsibility for her. Okay? And, if someone’s got to take the blame for letting her clean up the dead, that’s on me, too. Sorry.”

Anne relaxed and motioned for Robert to again release the woman. “Millie,” she addressed the woman in a very stern voice. “You have to tell me everything you did to the bodies, and then swear that you will not touch anyone else, man, goat, or house cat, that dies up here. Okay? Do you promise me that?”

Millie tried to look defiant but Anne's stare took command of her and she nodded meekly. "Yes'm."

"Fine. Now tell me about these aliens. I'll assume that you mean from outer space and not just crazy New Yorkers slipping up over the border. Right?"

Millie's eyes would not look at Anne. Staring at the ground, she mumbled another, "Yes'm."

"The nice lady's waiting, Millie. Tell her," urged the young law man.

"Can I sit down? My legs hurt. Bad." Anne looked at the Constable who ran to the other side of the barn and returned with an old rocking chair. Millie sank down into it. "Thank you, miss agent lady. I've been really bushed the past day. And my feet are roaring." She reached down and pulled off the old boot that barely held together on her right foot.

Anne looked at the bloody foot. Robert, the pilot looked at it and then at Anne, who nodded. He rushed out of the barn.

"Millie? I'm going to get you dressed in a special suit that will keep you warm and clean, and then get you to a place where we can take care of your feet. Millie? Do you understand?"

Millie was staring at her blood-covered hand in disbelief. "Oh, gawd! I've got it. Oh, gawd!" she kept repeating that all the time Robert and Anne were getting the decontamination suit on her. Once in it, Anne pulled out two special pressure cuffs and wrapped them around the woman's ankles, outside of the suit. "Once inflated they would slow down the loss of blood.

"There will be more FBI agents up here later. You stay put," she ordered the young officer. "Unless you have to

respond to another death, stay here!"

With that, Anne and Robert carried the fully enclosed Millie out of the barn, to the helicopter, and they lifted off two minutes later.

Millie had been placed in one of the isolation rooms next door to Anne's lab when she arrived. A medical technician she had seen on several occasions was cutting the old woman out of the contamination suit.

"Keep the feet of the suit intact, please," Anne asked. "I need to measure and test that blood."

As she prepared to receive the samples, the tech cleaned up Millie's feet—both were bleeding—and prepared to administer an IV and give the woman some clotting factor. She stopped and checked with Anne.

"You might as well. Just keep a really close watch on her. Tell me of any out of the ordinary reactions."

With Wiley being gone until the following day she decanted the blood—nearly a quarter of a pint—that had collected in the clean booties, but discarded the dirty and contaminated blood from the woman's boots. While half was being chilled for future study, Anne prepped a series of slides. Looking at the very first one she could plainly see that there were blood cells that were ruptured. Not all but at least a third of them. If all of Millie's blood was similar to this, she would soon have problems getting enough oxygen flowing through her body.

She paused long enough to tell the medical tech to get the old woman on oxygen and a plasma drip. "And, the saline as well. Thanks, Belinda."

"Do we think this is some sort of blood-borne disease?" Wiley's voice behind her asked her as she hung up the

receiver.

Anne shook her head slowly. "I thought you were taking a rest day." She looked at him and he smiled, innocently, and shrugged. "Okay. Glad you're here. I have no idea, and you know how I hate to kill lab mice..." She left the rest unsaid. They both knew that once infected, or even possibly infected, event the survivors had to be euthanized and incinerated. They had served their usefulness at that point. Nobody wanted them to hang around to make future generations of mice that might be carriers for some deadly mutated whatever. "Let's see if we can get some living cultures to see what they do in the incubator."

She picked up the phone again and dialed the medical tech in the next room. "Can you draw four Vacutainers for me? I need two lavenders, a gold and a light blue. No, wait. Cancel the gold and get an orange. I need to see if the blood refuses to clot, and the faster the better. Thanks!"

Wiley raised an eyebrow as he asked, "No blood culture yellow vial? What are you going to use for the incubation tests?" He meant the type of vial containing a special additive that kept the blood viable for such growth tests.

"Not yet," she told him. "I'll culture some blood from the light blue one. It's the one with a reversible coagulant. If I don't see anything from that I'll go for a second draw. I really don't want to tap our poor unwilling guest for too much right off the bat."

While Wiley ran several tests on the woman's blood, Anne began preparing slides and agar-filled culture dishes. She finished everything and began looking at the slides just as Wiley glanced up from one of his tests.

"You will want to see this," he said.

She walked over to his desk and looked into the old-fashioned microscope he preferred to use for initial studies.

"Oh! Not good. What do you suppose caused that?"

Wiley looked at her. "You mean the coagulation that made the sample as thick as old Jello? That's the one where I applied a small amount of clotting factor to see if the loss could be overcome. Lucky that didn't happen inside anyone. They'd go into total blood stoppage in about ten seconds. Death would be moments away." He sighed. It wasn't a good result, and it meant that standard injections of clotting factor that kept most hemophiliacs from bleeding would turn a victim's blood into a thick paste, stopping their heart in a few seconds.

Anne turned white as a ghost. She ran from the room and into the containment room next door. She was just in time to shout out, "Wait! No clotting factor!" to the startled tech. But, a true professional, the girl's hand immediately came back up from the position of pressing the button that would have inserted the needle into the woman's IV and dispensed the clotting factor.

Nervously, the girl turned. "What did I do?"

Anne took a breath. "As long as you hadn't gotten around to doing as I stupidly requested, that being giving her clotting factor, then you did nothing. It was my goof. Are we okay?"

Belinda nodded. "I was just about to give her that now that I have a good IV line in. Her veins are a little collapsed and roly so I had to try both arms a couple times. Had to give them a heat wrap to find anything usable."

Anne thanked the girl, gave her a few more instructions, and returned to her lab and a still startled Wiley. He listened to her explanation and smiled in relief. "That is wonderful news, Annie. It didn't even occur to me... Maybe I'm getting too old for this."

She disagreed. "I'll put it down to being a bit rusty. It has

been nearly a year after all. But, let's get on with looking at these slides."

An hour later they both sat back. Other than still being thinner than the samples from the corpses held below, Millie's blood showed most of the same problems. Broken blood cell walls, blood cells that appeared about to rupture, and a very low white cell count.

"We will need to do something about her blood problems, and fairly soon," Wiley suggested. "My first thought is to transfuse her. See if we can get the bad stuff out of her and give her a fighting chance."

He typed her blood, something neither of them had yet done, and ordered up ten liters of her O-negative blood. While they waited for it to be delivered Anne typed the blood of the two dead people she had downstairs. The young couple would be delivered later in the day and she made a note to get their samples typed as soon as possible.

Anne initially thought she might be onto something when both of the deceased victims proved to also have O-negative blood. She hated jumping to conclusions, but it was an interesting coincidence to say the least. Her hopes of homing in on something unique about the blood type went south when the blood of the young female turned out to be AB-positive. The boy was B-negative.

With just a half hour left in her day, she stood at the large window of the contamination chamber at the back of the lab. The body of the girl lay on the stainless steel exam table. Like all the others her feet were covered with small slashes, but her hands and even the undersides of her breasts also were cut in numerous places.

Anne sighed as she looked at the girl's body. *So young and so full of possibilities*, she thought as she directed one of the Waldoes to pull a sheet over the naked girl. She had

been particularly hit by the similarity between her own daughter, Sandy, and this girl. Both blonds and both in their teens. Also, both strikingly beautiful and... well, she would have to get all that out of her mind.

Anne went home.

"Annie?" Wiley called from down the hall the following morning. He was just coming from the lunch room. "I've got some more sad news." He stepped lively down the corridor and entered the lab with her.

"What is it?"

"This," he said pulling a few sheets of paper over to show her.

"Damn!" Anne said seeing the third sentence. "How far along do you think she was?"

He shook his head sadly. "From the hormone levels I'd say probably two months pregnant. I didn't want to cut into her to find out. I'm fairly sure it is not significant to our investigation."

"I agree. I'm not taking her baby from her at this point."

She was about to sit down when her desk phone rang. It was a special tone indicating an outside call being routed through a phony number. "Yes? Agent Boone speaking."

A young-sounding voice she recognized came on. "Uhh, Agent Boone, This is Bill the Mountie up in Canada. Uhh, we have another death and this one is pretty bad. One of Millie's alien roll-playing ladies. She's—" his voice choked and she could hear the sounds of him retching a moment later. He came back after that. "Sorry. Got a little sick. It's another one like Millie except that she's really torn up. Like someone put her into a grain combine." He gagged a few

more times before he was able to continue. “I’ve got her locked up where she fell. Can you come up here and get her, please?”

Something he had said finally registered. “Did you say ‘fell?’ As in she isn’t standing upright like the rest?”

He confirmed it and she promised to either be there later in the day or to have another set of agents come. She hung up and dialed Quimby Narz’s number.

“I need the helo to go back up, post haste. Another body but this one may be special. How soon?”

“If you can get out to the airport in fifteen minutes it will be about fifteen minutes,” he told her.

She gave Wiley a brief explanation before leaving.

“You have a good flight,” he told her. “I’m going to finish all the blood work on our young couple.”

The helicopter was awaiting for her at the small hangar off to one side of the taxiway. She slid her car into the building, got out and walked to the waiting aircraft. By the time she climbed in and connected her harness, the big door to the building was already closed and the agent outside had disappeared.

With a flying time of just under twenty-eight minutes Anne had no time to look outside; she was concentrating on what needed to be done and in the least amount of time possible. A look around her showed that all the necessary items had been packed for her including a body bag that would double as a stretcher. Another of her son’s small inventions, a small Swift Solar Battery pack and several strips of a special two-part metal could be activated upon laying the bag out stiffening to the point where they would keep the bottom of the bag straight and could support nearly three hundred pounds.

They touched down at the farm where the young boy and girl had been found. Their Mountie met them and drove Anne and her pilot the quarter mile into the small town and to the house where the latest victim was to be found.

She immediately could see why the woman had not been left in a standing position. From the blood spatter plainly visible it appeared the woman had been standing at the top of her stairs, or perhaps was coming down them, when her strength left her and she tumbled the rest of the way.

Now resting at the bottom of the thirteen steps, her crumpled form was both covered with blood as well as sitting in a pool of the same liquid.

She turned to ask Mountie Cavendish to bring in the body bag from the front porch, but he wasn’t there. Her pilot hooked a thumb over his shoulder and made a gagging sound.

“Can’t say that I blame him, Agent Boone,” he commented as he turned to get the requested item. “It’s all pretty gristly if I have to tell the truth. So,” he handed her the rolled bag, “how can you do it so, well, *casually?*”

“Nothing casual about it. I see this sort of thing far too often—grab that far end and stretch it out for me, please—but I never really get used to it. Some people stop thinking of these poor people as humans; I can’t do that. But, I have found that I can’t look them in their eyes. At least, not the dead ones. Okay. Put these gloves on while I get a series of photographs, then you and I get to put her into the bag.”

She reached behind her and pulled a small but powerful camera from her purse and began taking as many pictures as she felt were needed. She finished, put the camera back and knelt down to activate the body bag. In seconds it had stretched to its full size. Slipping on her own pair of gloves she and the pilot carefully picked the woman’s body up.

Most probably already very light, without any blood the body could not have weighed any more than about fifty pounds. With rigor mortis having set in, they had a little difficulty in straightening her so she would fit inside, but soon had the bag sealed and moved to one side.

Anne took several samples of the blood, including a few swabs of the blood on the stairwell walls, before packing up and going outside.

Bill Cavendish was sitting on the porch's swinging seat, face in his hands, sobbing. She walked over and put one hand on his left shoulder and gave it a small squeeze.

"It's okay to feel like a human," she told him, "and humans get bothered by all this sort of thing."

He looked up into her face and gave a wan grin. "At Mountie Academy they show us pictures and videos of people who've been shot up, people who've been mangled by bear and even people who've been in accidents and lost their heads. But you don't know those people. I know... *knew* Gloria in there. She was kind of like a local grandmother to me. I'm from Red Deer over in Alberta. My folks and Gran are out there and Gloria would have me in when I came by each week for tea and a sandwich. I'm gonna miss her." The Mountie's eyes went narrow and determined. "You get the person who did this!"

"I'll try, but I guess you don't subscribe to the whole alien things."

He shook his head. "Alien or Canadian, I don't care as long as you stop him!"

CHAPTER 4 /

PUNCTURING THE MYTH

MOMENTS later the Mountie drove them and their cargo back to the farm where they soon took off for Shopton. On arrival, the agent at the hangar said he would have the body at the lab in an hour.

Anne thanked him and her pilot and drove away. It had just gone two o'clock and she had many things to do before she headed for home.

For one thing, two of the swabbed samples had a different appearance on the wall in the stairwell. It might have been her imagination, but they seemed to have a slight green tinge to them. As she prepared her slides she explained this to Wiley.

"So, it may turn out that our anticoagulants have been administered by aliens? Little green ones?" She looked askance at him but had to smile when she saw his mischievous grin.

"Gosh, I hope so, Wiley. That would certainly help me sleep at night knowing it's just some sort of invasion from space and not another cockamamie bacteria or virus or exploding bug!"

As it turned out, the off-color blood contained both Gloria's blood—sludgy and with no anticoagulant properties—plus a healthy amount of an oil of wintergreen over-the-counter arthritis rub.

By the time she headed for home it was clear that Gloria had been heavily infected with the same blood problems, but had most likely died from her fall down the stairs.

Anne turned to Wiley before heading out the door. "You

look tired, Wiley. Why don't you head home and take tomorrow off as well?" The slow and sad shake of his head made her let the door go and come over to him. "What is it?"

"Sit, Annie," he commanded gently. Once she had taken her lab stool he also sat. "I will be leaving tonight but I won't be back. I have, as I mentioned, hemophilia. That I can control. What I can't control is a problem with my heart. And, no, before you say anything, it isn't something I should have told you about. I only found out today."

He explained that he had spent the previous weekend in Shopton General Hospital having a series of tests run. The results had come through that morning after Anne left for Canada.

"I have a heart condition that is inoperable but manageable with medication. The valves inside are thin and beginning to harden. I am not in danger of keeling over just now, but it means that I have to stay away from stress and physical exertion. I don't do any heavy lifting here, but..." He swept his arm around the room. "And so, that part is the good news. The bad news is that I have pancreatic cancer. Very early stage and they will be getting that out of me tomorrow, but I can't be around any infectious things the rest of my life."

Tears were clouding Anne's vision now. "You'll be okay?"

"I will, I just won't be here. I will be moving in with my beautiful daughter, the one you saved a few years ago, and she will take care of me for a few months before I can be on my own again. I will miss you, terribly, Anne Swift. Oh, my god how I will miss you!"

Tears were streaming down both their faces and they hugged for more than a minute. Anne finally backed away and kissed Wiley Oswaldt right on the lips. Without another

word between them she left the lab.

When she returned the following day the lab seemed cold and empty. She had worked with and without Wiley for many years but it never felt like this before. So... final!

Anne dug into her work going through each and every one of the samples taken from all the victims. There were so many variants to keep track of that she went down the hall to the storage room and pulled out a large pad of two-by-three-foot paper and a roll of tape.

She covered the right side wall with two rows of four sheets and labeled each with a victim's name or species.

Before sitting down she went to the next room to check up on Millie. The tech reported that she was no better and no worse than during the previous several days.

"But, she slips into and out of a coma. Not long periods, but she is so far under it can't be just sleep. Don't worry, though. She's a tough old lady, and I think she is going to hold on."

Anne felt better, but not happy. It wasn't like her to forget or ignore someone in her care for a couple days.

After returning to the lab she began listing all the findings on each victim—plus Millie—having to do with blood and tissue samples taken. There were so many similarities and yet too many differences to see the exact pattern. Here eyes sought out as many "knowns" as they could find. She spotted six:

- ✓ All of them had received a series of from fifty-three to over two-hundred thin slashes to their skin.
- ✓ Slashes were always on the down side of body parts.
- ✓ All had lost the vast majority of their blood to either the outside of their skin, or to internal bleeding.

- √ Blood remaining inside each body showed a sludgy yet not coagulated consistency.
- √ Blood outside was thinner yet it seemed to dry faster than it should given the conditions in which each victim was discovered.
- √ With the addition of Gloria, they represented four blood groups plus the goats' type.

She was startled out of her thoughts by the ringing of her phone. Picking it up, she answered, "Hello, Constable Cavendish, It's Barbara Boone. What can I do for you, and please don't tell me you have another victim!"

"Yes, ma'am. I mean, no, ma'am. It's me and I don't have another victim. But you need to get up here. Something's happening that just isn't right. Some of the folks in Gergenville tell me they spotted some space aliens walking around town after midnight, peeking and poking into places like they were searching for something. And, dragging people off."

"Space aliens? Really, Bill. Pull the other one."

"No, ma'am. One woman up here, another of Millie's group, got her cell phone out and took a pretty dim video, but she showed it to me. I have to tell you, it's spooky! Shows a couple of these creatures, all sleek and shiny and sort of a grayish white with big heads. Their skin kinda billows out a little so they shimmer as they walk around in the pictures. I can't figure out how to send the video from her phone so I need you to come up. Can you?"

Anne sat back. Space aliens, indeed! Shimmering whitish skin and big heads! Ha! Or, as she contemplated the image she now had in her head, was it a 'Ha!' situation?

"Bill. I can be up there in an hour. Is there any place

closer to town than that farm to land?"

He told her about a small park with enough clearance for the helicopter to land.

An hour later she stood in front of the Mountie in the living room of another old woman. She stared in open awe at Anne. "I've seen you before, haven't I?"

Anne looked at her. "Well, I have been here a couple times this past week. Perhaps then?" she suggested.

"No. I've seen you on the television and in a news magazine before. Wife of someone famous. It'll come to me. It'll come."

Oh dear, Anne thought. Please don't let her announce to the world that I'm Damon Swift's wife. Please!!!

To get the woman's thoughts off her, she asked to be shown the video.

They had to close the curtains and turn off the lights to get the room dark enough to make out what the phone had recorded. When it was over—the woman had managed about fifty-seconds of video—Anne looked at the Mountie.

"We want to thank you, Mavis, for showing me that. If I can borrow your phone for about five minutes then we will leave you to enjoy your day." Anne keyed in a couple commands on the phone and soon had the video file uploaded to her special FBI email account. After checking her own phone to see that the file had arrived, she gave the older woman her phone back.

Outside she practically dragged the Mountie around the corner of the house.

"First, you have to go find that man in the video. The one those two supposed aliens grabbed onto. One of them appeared to have injected the man with something. I have

to get him down to my lab before it is too late. Second, you need to get reinforcements up here pronto.”

“Uhh, why. Oh, and how many?”

“Why? Because those *aliens* are men in germ-barrier suits. Their large heads are helmets. How many? Bring a dozen of more up here and get them hidden. I think our aliens are trying to finish up some sort of experiment and I want that stopped before anyone else dies!”

* * *

A bewildered man was bundled into a clean suit and shoved unceremoniously into the helicopter. Even the Mountie could see the small red spot on his shoulder where a needle had gone into his skin.

Down in Shopton the airport’s FBI agent promised to expedite the transfer, and the man arrived at the downtown lab just three minutes after Anne did. She had him installed in the isolation room next to Millie. She waved weakly at him once the window between the rooms had been made transparent, and muttered his name.

“Willy” told Anne he was either fifty or fifty-one, depending on whether his mother or his father was telling the story. He was one of the town’s two mail carriers and seemed more worried about missing his rounds for the day rather than his own health.

Anne took a few tubes of blood and began to quickly go through them. She found what she hoped for.

The coagulant properties of his blood were still in good shape so the substance he had been injected with was not being obscured. In fact, it was plian to see under magnification.

In with his regular blood cells—red and white—were the beginnings of some very strange blood cells. They were

still recognizable as being human, but they were different. Either natural or genetic modification mutations were evident.

She called to the tech. “How did the transfusion work for Millie?”

“Well, her blood is fine and she can coagulate on her own, but I think it was too late for her brain. I think she suffered oxygen deprivation, Ms. Boone. Sorry.”

“Okay. I’ve typed Willy’s blood. He’s O-positive. Get him flushed out with clean blood and let’s keep a good eye on him! Draw blood every six hours.”

By the following morning his initial blood samples showed increased signs of the mutations, and his coagulation factors were dropping.

Fortunately, in his body with its new blood, there were no signs of deterioration.

Her phone rang. “Yes, Quimby?”

“Anne? Our Mountie friend captured two men up there in Gergenville last night. He took a bullet to the shoulder from one of them but will be okay. I’ve got the two under guard and being transferred down here. I’ll have them at my headquarters in an hour. I’ll come get you. I want you here when I question them.”

“Great. I think I know what’s been going on.”

“You do?”

“Oh, yes, Quimby. I do!”

When the two men were ushered, rather roughly, into the interrogation room Anne and Quimby were waiting. Both were still clad in their Tyvek clean suits with their helmets now removed. Both wore smirks on their faces.

Those looks disappeared when Anne reached into her

purse and pulled out two hypodermic syringes.

“What the hell’s been going on?” Quimby asked harshly. When neither of them spoke, but were both eyeing the syringes, he slammed his hand down on the table. “Tell me what you were doing in Gergenville?”

Anne reached over and patted his forearm. “I can tell you, Agent Narz. By the way,” she said facing the men across the table, “I am Agent Boone and I am a microbiologist. I run a lab like you can’t believe and I have isolated the illegal plasma you’ve been injecting into people. “She looked pointedly down to the table and then back into their eyes. “I brought some of it along for you.”

“We didn’t do anything!” insisted the man of the left.

“Ah, but we all know that is a lie. For starters you shot a Canadian Mountie. That in itself is a life sentence without parole offense. But, I can shorten that for you. Very short in fact.” She glanced back down at the waiting syringes.

Faced with what they both obviously were aware of and that it would mean a death sentence, they opted to tell their story.

“We work for a laboratory in Quebec. For a Doctor Francois Cretienne. He’s been trying to come up with an inoculation for soldiers that will make them self-healing if they take a bullet. He hopes to make it so they can seal themselves up and not lose more than a few hundred milliliters of blood.”

“For the government? Narz asked. Both men shook their heads.

Anne nodded. “Okay. So he has you two out injecting unsuspecting goats and people to try out his shots. And, even though it is killing each of them, except for two we got to early enough to save, you keep on shooting people

up. Your own Canadian citizens. Why?”

They shrugged. It all came down to money. They were being paid nearly ten thousand dollars per month to be the drug administrators for the illegal experiments.

“Why the cuts all over their feet?” Quimby inquired.

“I can answer that one, Agent Narz. These two needed to get them bleeding but didn’t want to draw attention by actually shooting them. Is that correct?” she asked the prisoners. They nodded. “So, the standing up was to give gravity a better chance of drawing the blood downward?” Another pair of nods.

It required another threat of being injected with their own deadly serum for the men to tell them where the illegal lab and doctor would be found.

* * *

Anne returned to the lab with Quimby Narz only to be told the sad news that Millie had passed away. In the end her brain function had diminished and she simply stopped breathing.

Their other charge, Willy, was doing well. He would need to remain for another week to ensure that his blood work came out clean, but he was in no hurry to leave, especially after seeing his acquaintance die in the next room.

“No, I’ll stay here and eat your good food and watch U.S. television until you tell me I have to go,” he told Anne.

“Well, Quimby, I can’t really say that this was fun, but I can tell you this. This was my final case,” Anne said as they left the room.

She paused to judge the look on the FBI man’s face. It

showed a mixture of resignation and sadness. Perhaps even tinged with a little disbelief or hope that she might be kidding him.

“Are you certain?” he asked.

She nodded. “Yes. I’ve thought this over for quite some time. A couple cases back in fact, so for at least two years. Last year’s debacle was just about it for me, and to tell you the truth, if that woman you came back to replace had been here, I wouldn’t even have taken this one. What with advances I just can’t seem to keep up with and Wiley’s cancer and heart causing him to retire, and... well, I’m tired of the whole secrecy thing. Anyway, You’ve got several good, young and mainly *unattached* people now. Almost any one of them can pick up my slack and even give you more than a few weeks a year. The money has been nice and I’ve salted almost all of it away.”

“I know,” Quimby told her with a small grin. “Remember that you keep it upstairs at Merchants & Co., and they are all part of the Bureau. Speaking of which, if you go we have to move this facility.”

“Why? I’m not about to tell anybody, you know,” she told him.

Now, Quimby sadly shook his head. “Not willingly, I’m sure, but we don’t take any chances. It’s going to take a couple years, but one day the only thing under the bank will be dirt. The work this lab and the others like it scattered around the country do is so vital... well, *you* know how vital it is. I don’t need to preach to the choir, do I? But, we won’t ever forget you or leave you hanging. The truth of the matter is that as Damon Swift’s wife and Tom Swift’s mother you are a target.” He sighed. “I might as well tell you the truth. I promised I’d do that.”

Anne nodded and took a seat. Quimby sat down beside

her.

“You have been the target of at least five kidnap plots over the past eleven years. Perhaps not you specifically, but as one of our scientist at this facility. I don’t know if you recall a young technician by the name of Tracy Lithway. She was here back, oh... five years ago. Anyway, she was here one day and not the next. I know that Wiley was concerned and made inquiries, but I had to tell him that it was a Bureau decision. She wasn’t a good match. The truth is the girl was found out to be paid by a South American drug cartel to find out who in this area was responsible for identifying the exact species of poppy their drugs were derived from.”

“Oh. I remember that case. It was me—”

“Right. It was you, and this Tracy woman was on her way to rendezvous with a couple of the cartel’s hired hit men when we intercepted her. Short story is they never got your name so you were safe. That time. Well, short of trying to scare you I really can’t say much other than to tell you how big a factor you have been in our success and in my career. I know it isn’t much, but...” and he leaned over to kiss her gently in the cheek, “...I want to thank you, Anne Swift. For everything.”

Anne blushed. She tutted and tried to flutter her eyes so that the tears welling up didn’t spill out.

“Overall, Quimby, it kind of has been a pleasure. I hope that our paths will cross again, outside of work that is.”

“All I can do is to ask that you come back here tomorrow for a debrief and to turn in your phone and all other security and Bureau stuff. And, to wish you a very happy life, Anne Swift!”

* * *

Anne finished packing her groceries into the trunk of her car when a very solid something was poked harshly into her side. She tried to move away but a vice-like grip on her right elbow prevented her from doing so.

“You will do quite well, Mrs. Swift, if you should remain very calm. In fact,” the slightly Asian-sounding voice told her, “it would be best to, as a song I heard many years ago tells you, to put on a happy face.” The object, a gun was Anne’s best guess, was poked into her side again.

She winced but managed to mask it with a tight smile. From the corner of her mouth she told her assailant, “You won’t get away with this, whoever you are.”

A small chuckle came from the man—whom she now could see was definitely Asian and possibly Korean from the shape of his face—and the elbow grip tightened.

“Now, you will get into your car and I will also get into the car, but in the back seat. You will pull out of this market and turn to the right. After that I will direct you where to go.” Seeing Anne reaching into her purse he hissed, “Stop! What are you doing?”

Calmly, more than she actually felt, Anne replied, “Only the trunk of this car opens without a key. If you expect me to get in and drive, I have to get them from my purse.” She hoped that he couldn’t see that she was already palming the unlock fob.

“Fine. Do it slowly and then show me what you take from your bag,” he directed, still mostly in a hiss.

Anne opened the shoulder bag and reached inside with the hand still holding the key. Inside, she pressed a button on a small additional fob that was attached to the lining. It had been issued to her a few months earlier when she had “retired” from her secret position as an FBI microbiologist. It was still so secret that not even her family had ever been

told.

She pulled her hand out and showed the would-be kidnapper her key fob. “There.”

He said nothing, choosing to poke the gun into her sore side one more time. This time Anne grunted in pain, but she opened the driver’s door and climbed in.

One minute later, the gun barrel now touching the back of her neck, she pulled out of the parking lot and turned left.

A chill ran down Anne’s spine as she realized that this man would not hesitate to kill her if she did not do as he demanded.

This could possibly be her final drive, and she felt tears run down her face as she thought of her family.

EPILOG

AS THE CAR sped out of town, heading to the north, Anne kept a lookout for another car. She hoped it was a very special and particular vehicle. Within a few minutes she spotted a beige-gray SUV coming up from behind.

She surreptitiously tapped her brake three times, not enough to cause the car to slow but enough to make the brake lights flash.

Like all Swift family members, Anne wore a TeleVoc communication pin. But this one was special. When she was on the grounds of Enterprises, it functioned just as all other pins did. Outside of the facility it could still be used to contact two people: Harlan Ames, head of Enterprises Security; and FBI agent Quimby Narz.

It was Agent Narz's voice that now came through.

"Anne? We are behind you. Are you okay?"

She subvocalized back, "For now, but I have an Asian man crouching behind my driver's seat with a gun at my neck. I am not happy and I have ice cream that is going to melt. Get up here and help me, Quimby!"

"We will pull along side just after this next bend in the road. Maintain a steady speed and it'll be over in a minute."

She left the line open in case he wished to add anything.

The curve was only a few degrees so she didn't need to slow down but did anyway.

"Why are we slowing?" the man demanded.

"I'm not going to slide around a curve, you little twerp!" she responded.

The front end of the SUV was even with the back door of

Anne's car. It inched forward a few more feet before something exploded out of its right side and into Anne's car.

The powerful lance that Narz had launched pierced the rear door and stabbed into the Asian. High voltage, like a TASER, jolted through the man rendering him instantly unconscious. The cable detached and Anne and Agent Narz pulled their cars to the side of the road.

Furious, Anne jumped from her car, yanked open the back door and pulled the man out by his hair. She gave him a very solid kick in the back before turning around to face the agent.

"What are you going to do about my car?" she demanded, the adrenaline coursing through her system making her sound more angry than she actually was.

Narz pulled out his cell phone and pressed a series of numbers. It beeped three times and he spoke quietly into it before he put it back in his suit jacket pocket.

While he handcuffed and leg shackled the prisoner, and got the limp body into the very back of his SUV, Anne sat in her car, legs out and feet on the road. Periodically she would look at the quarter-inch spear that still stuck out of the back door.

Five minutes later an identical SUV pulled up behind them and two men in immaculate overalls got out. The first one went up to Agent Narz while the second one inspected Anne's car.

"I'll sell it to you... cheap," she offered through clenched teeth. "ElectroSpear included at no extra cost."

He chuckled but went back to his own vehicle. One minute later he returned with a portable impact wrench in one hand and a car door over his shoulder. His partner took the door while he undid the bolts holding the ruined door.

He then took the new one, virtually identical, and installed it while the first man took the old door back to their SUV.

By the time he returned with a small yet powerful upholstery shampoo machine—to clean the small amount of blood the Asian man had leaked after being pierced by the lance—the new door was completely mounted and the man was putting a small amount of white grease on the hinges and smudging the lower part of the door with dirt and a little additional grease.

If Anne were to leave her car in the driveway one evening and came out the next morning she would not have been able to spot that anything had changed.

She turned to Agent Narz to apologize, but he beat her to it.

“Nothing to say, Anne. You may have retired but we will keep an eye on you for as long as it takes to ensure that you are kept safe. Have a nice evening. Oh, and thanks for not panicking. You handled this very, very well.”

Ninety seconds later she was alone on the stretch of highway. With a sigh she climbed back into her car and headed for home, now just delayed by about twenty minutes.

On the way through town her TeleVoc beeped in her head. She acknowledged the incoming call and Harlan Ames voice came through.

“Anne. I just got off the horn with Quimby. He told me all about it. I had asked Damon to keep low key on the little matter of a group of Asian spies-stroke-terrorists that have been pestering you Swifts for a few years. Does the name Black Cobra mean anything to you?”

“Of course. But he’s dead.”

“So we strongly believe. But this is his daughter causing

problems. All I can say is never go anywhere without that little emergency beacon Narz gave you. This may be a one-time thing, but I don’t want you taking chances.”

“Understood, and thank you, Harlan. I suppose I ought to tell Damon all about my old double life. Or, at least some day.”

She ended the call and pulled into her driveway.

The ice cream survived, although a little soft, but was in fine shape two hours later when she served it to her husband just prior to sitting in his lap and telling him her story.

She wasn’t the least surprised when he kissed her neck gently and confessed he had known all about it for at least the past three years.

ANNE SWIFT will be back soon in a revealing look into her secret life:

*INTERVIEW WITH A
MOLECULAR BIOLOGICAL DETECTIVE*