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THE ANNE SWIFT INVESTIGATES SERIES

Anne Swift: Molecular Biologist Detective

The Pernicious Parasitic Pandemic

By T. Edward Fox

Anne Swift thought she had left her double life as a secret molecular detective for the FBI far behind her. Her position was quickly filled and even her identity was released publicly within a year of her decision to leave.

Now, getting a little bored with housework, and with her son, Tom Swift, married and her daughter, Sandy, working full time, she feels like she is rattling around the kitchen far too much.

When an opportunity comes up to train a group of new FBI scientists, she jumps at it—well, she is pushed by her husband who knows her very well—and departs for San Francisco on a three-week assignment.

Little does she realize she is about to get pulled back into detective mode when one of her students becomes one of her patients. Then, another and another.

Then, it begins to spread!

This book is dedicated to going back for one more spin around the block. And to those who are pernicious. And to people who are so good at what they do they discover saying the simple word, "No," sometimes is the hardest thing to utter. Whether the challenge is slipped silently through their letterbox or shoved right in their face, they often pick it up and run with it.

THE ANNE SWIFT INVESTIGATES SERIES

Interview With a Molecular Detective

FOREWORD

Anne Swift has seen more terrible things in fifteen years than most people see in three lifetimes. She has seen death, disfigurement, and disaster. But, she has been a huge part in finding out the why and how, and ultimately leading those around her to stopping, curbing or containing whatever it is doing the bad things.

When the FBI publicly recognized her for her work, and then following the lengthy interview she gave more than a year ago, I figured that she put all of the molecular detective work behind her and was ready to just enjoy life.

You can imagine my surprise when I heard that she had taken a temporary position back with the Bureau. I don't believe any of us can imagine what brought about that decision. I know of a fact that she was so disillusioned with the FBI after her last two cases that had become cranky and unwilling to even speak about what had happened.

But, here she is, back again but in a different situation that ultimately leads her back into familiar surroundings.

Victor Appleton II

ANNE SWIFT and the Pernicious Parasitic Pandemic

CHAPTER 1**Get Out There!**

ANNE SWIFT sighed. She had been sitting at the breakfast table for more than five minutes, staring right through her husband, Damon Swift, at some point several feet or even many miles beyond.

For nearly sixteen of their twenty-three years of married life she had been a wife and mother by night, and a semi-frequent secret scientist in the employ of the FBI by day. Not all days, and not all the time. In fact, she had averaged only about four assignments per year, generally lasting from a week to two weeks apiece.

For most of that time only her FBI handler, Quimby Narz—recently retired from the Bureau—and her husband's head of Security, Harlan Ames, had known about this double life. That ended about two years before she finally quit. Many things had gone into that decision and have been chronicled elsewhere, but the upshot of it all was that Anne Swift had left the FBI, been publicly acknowledged for her enormous contributions, and even allowed to give a major interview about the work she had performed.

Her husband—world-famous inventor Damon Swift, and her son, Tom Swift, and daughter, Sandy, all found out about it. Still active at the time she believed they had been kept in the dark.

She was wrong. Damon had known for a couple years at

least. Even though her “job” often had her working with deadly germs, organisms, people, and the like, he had seen the work was keeping her busy, allowing her to work in her field of training, and generally made her happy.

Until the day it didn’t!

Now, she had been away from everything for fifteen months. The final assignment, the interview, the periodic contacts via a special cell phone. Finished.

All she still had as a reminder was a small key fob in her purse that could be used at any time to bring FBI agents to her rescue... if necessary.

It had been, once.

“I understand that the value of the common one cent piece has diminished to the point where it no longer entices a response from the average American, so I will offer you a full nickel for those thoughts, Anne,” Damon Swift said to her over the table with a small grin.

She focused on him and smiled back. Her mind had been far away, and her thoughts had been centered on her former job. As much as she disliked the secrecy and, ultimately, the outright lies, it had been some of the best times outside of her family life she ever experienced.

Even a few times when her life had been in real jeopardy, the adrenaline rush had been incredible.

“Miss it?” he asked.

“Hmmm? Uhh, miss what, dear?”

Damon looked at Anne and raised his eyebrows.

“Oh. That. Well, not really. I mean, I don’t miss all the bad stuff or the field work or the possibility of someone recognizing me and having to use that terrible phony name, Barbara Boone—I mean the heaven’s sake, what were they thinking. ‘Hey, if Daniel Boone was a great frontier hero,

why not a woman? Let’s call her Barbie Boone. No, Barbara sounds more professional!’ For crying out loud, Damon... *Barbara Boone!* And then to have poor old Wiley Os—”

She stopped and put her knuckles up to her mouth.

“Oops! I wasn’t supposed to mention anyone else’s name. Forget I mention him, please?”

Damon nodded. “Forgotten. So, how is Doctor Oswaldt? Last I heard from Harlan he was back at work, teaching in some community college in Connecticut. Cancer free, from what I hear.”

Anne stared at her husband. “You—you know about Wiley?” She was stunned. She hadn’t mentioned him... or had she? Now, she wasn’t so sure.

“Yes. If you will recall one evening after you quit that final time you and I shared two bottles of a rather excellent Merlot. Well, when I ‘we shared,’ I mean I had two glasses and you had the rest.” He looked and could see she was blushing at the memory. “It was in your final five minutes of being lucid that you told me all about him. And some young woman I believe is named Penny and about double-brew coffee and some Englishman. That’s about all I recall.”

“So Harlan has kept you up to date?”

“Well, it all started when I had him check into this other man in your life. I wanted to make certain he was no threat to our happy home life.”

Anne stuck her tongue out.

“So, if you miss things, why not at least have Harlan make a few inquiries. Maybe your old FBI boss will put in a good word. Do you know if he stayed in the area?”

She shook her head. “No. From what I’ve heard, Quimby Narz packed up on his final day, went down to Washington for his retirement ceremony, and then made a sharp right

turn and didn't stop until he got out to Arizona and some place called Sun City. He sent me a postcard once with a quick note saying he had taken up golf because it is the only thing old men do out there."

They talked for a few more minutes until he had to go to work. Before he left he turned to her, saying, "I'll come home and grab you for lunch. How about your favorite Italian place?"

Anne scrunched up her nose. "Lunch, okay, but not fancy. How about that burger place Tom, Bashalli, Bud and Sandy go to. Flock of Burgers? I think I could do with something sloppy and greasy."

"Sounds great. See you at eleven-thirty!"

It had been a few years since just the two of them had headed out for a mid-week lunch so Anne was excited enough to be standing by the curb when Damon drove up, right on schedule.

"Hey, mister," she said climbing into the car. "Buy me a burger and Ill let you kiss me. Add fries and you can kiss me twice!" She giggled. She felt as if a weight had been lifted from her shoulders. Today was going to be fun!

The parking lot at Flock of Burgers—sister restaurant to Herd of Chickens—was beginning to fill up, but as they stepped inside the owner came up to them, a huge smile on his face.

"Mr. and Mrs. Swift!" He looked around them for a second but was soon back. "I see that you are alone. No Tom?"

"No. Just the two old Swifts," Damon replied with a grin.

"Well, in that case I'll give you my best table. Come right this way." He led them through the main area of tables over to a booth that held a sign: Management Only

He swept his right arm indicating that they should have a seat. "I will be back shortly to take your orders, personally," he told them placing two menus in front of them.

"Well, this is a nice surprise," Anne commented as their host bustled away toward the kitchen. Her face was smiling for a few seconds but suddenly went slack, and her jaw hung open. "Oh, my goodness!" she exclaimed.

"What?" Damon asked, now concerned.

"That," she responded, pointing at the menu.

Her husband looked where she was pointing and broke out in gales of laughter. "Anne. You're famous!"

What had brought this about was a new listing on the menu, the "Anne Swift Burger." It was described as a combination chicken and turkey patty with a layer of brie cheese, sautéed mushrooms and a "super secret sauce of science."

"I guess I know what I'm having," she said closing the menu. "I'll have to ask about that sauce, but the rest sounds wonderful."

The secret sauce turned out to be a light garlic aioli, or mayonnaise, with just a hint of spice and smoked paprika. Once their food was brought to the table, the owner hovered looking pensive. This lasted until Anne took the first bite and smiled.

"Wonderful! I knew it would be, but this is incredible."

"Uhh, and you don't mind that we put your name on it?" their host asked a bit nervously.

"I'm flattered and not certain I rate the honor, but no. I am very happy with that. Thank you!"

Anne and Damon were nearly finished with their food when an odd assortment of beeps came from inside her purse. She looked at him and set the last of the fries back

onto the plate. “Should I answer that?” she asked.

He nodded. “Might as well. You’ve kept the phone and that safety fob, so I suppose you should.”

With a weary sigh Anne pulled the special phone from her purse and looked at the now silent object. As she had anticipated, the screen showed a series of numbers that she recognized as the special identifier code. She poked the redial button.

“Who is this?” she asked as soon as the connection went through. Hearing the response, her face paled.

“It’s Quimby, Anne. Long time no annoy. How are you these days?”

“Quimby?” she repeated, looking at Damon who was, in turn, looking questioningly at her. “My goodness. I thought you were out in Sin City or someplace like that.”

“It’s Sun, but I guess you’ve heard the news about that senior prostitution ring out there. That aside, I’m back in the area and was wondering if you and Damon would care to join me tonight for dinner. I have a proposition for you and I want his opinion as well. Can you make it?”

“Hang on,” she said putting one hand over the mouthpiece. She told Damon about the invitation. He shrugged. Uncovering the phone, she said, “The question ought to be *will* I make it, Quimby. Or, is it still Agent Narz?”

“No. At least not right now. The bureau has requested me to come back as a consultant on something very important. It’s a new case that seems to have started out near where I was and seems to be fairly nasty. Right up your street, as it were. But, even if it is just to have a friendly meal, the invitation stands. Well?”

Anne sighed again. “Okay. One for old time’s sake. A

repayment for you saving me that time I was shanghaied in my own car. When and where?”

He named a place on the outskirts of town and suggested seven p.m.

Anne’s appetite had gone so she shoved her plate away and took a long sip of her cola. She spotted the manager coming their way and forced a smile onto her face.

“Can it stay the way it is, or do you want me to make any changes?” he asked.

Patting him on his forearm she replied, “You keep it just the way it is. And, I’m proud to have it on your menu.”

He was still beaming as they left the restaurant and got into the car. Little conversation happened on the way home, but Damon offered to call in and have his afternoon appointment cancelled so he could stay home with her.

“Don’t be silly,” she responded. “I’m fine, and I probably need to have some alone time to ponder what this might lead to. I’ve dived with more death than I care to think about and at this point in my life would rather not take chances. After all, I want to become a grandmother and maybe a great-grandmother someday, and take trips with you and—” Her voice choked a little and Damon turned in time to see her wipe a single tear from her left cheek.

Before she got out he kissed her tenderly. “I love you, Anne, and support you in whatever you want to do or decide to do. You know that, don’t you?”

She kissed him a second time. “Yep. So, mister. Can you come in for a little while?” She raised her eyebrows and wiggled them a little.

An hour later she waved goodbye to him as he drove back to work.

They arrived at the restaurant five minutes late. Sitting in

a chair next to the Hostess' table was a gray-haired man slightly hunched over. With an appalled shudder, Anne recognized her former FBI handler.

"Oh, god, Quimby," she said as he rose. "What's happened to you?"

He smiled at her. "It's part of the thing that has brought me back, Anne. Hello, Damon," he said offering his hand. "Let's go sit down and I'll tell you all about this."

Once at their table he began telling her about the previous sixteen months.

"Well, I moved from her to the Phoenix area, but not as a retiree." He gave Anne a wry grin and a shrug. "Another bureau secret thing. Ah, check that. I intended to retire and even went to Washington for the pat on the back ceremony and threats to never divulge certain information, but they offered me a 'final assignment,' " he said making finger quotes, " 'that should only take a couple weeks. A month tops.' "

"What was it, agent Narz," Damon asked.

"Please. It's Quimby. Anyway, it was to try to break up a senior prostitution ring operating from one of the older retirement communities. Seems there are a lot of old men who are either alone, or are married to older women who are past that age where they feel like... well, you know. So, an outfit from Nevada moved in and managed to convince some 50-somethings that this was a great way to make nontaxable cash, and the rest is history."

"Those poor women," Anne stated.

Quimby snorted. "Poor doesn't describe them, Anne. These were not some young runaways trying to stay alive out on the streets. These were well-to-do women who enjoyed the extra eight or nine thousand dollars a month!"

The three sat quietly while their waiter took their drink orders.

"And, so, why do you look so old and tired?"

Another snort. "Anne, would you believe that this is my natural hair color? Been this way since my mid-forties. What you used to see was with it colored and expertly highlighted. But, I do have to admit that I have been pretty tired lately and feel run down. No. I feel like I have *been* run down. But, this isn't getting to the reason I'm back in Shopton."

Anne Swift narrowed her eyes before prompting him. "Go on..."

"Okay. About two months ago a woman in Scottsdale went to the hospital complaining of abdominal cramps. X-rays showed nothing and so did, or didn't, an MRI."

"Did they scope her?" Anne broke in.

"Finally. It took three rounds of antibiotics and some major anti-inflammatories before they could convince her it was time to say 'ahhhhhhh,' and when they did they were astonished."

"I'm guessing Crone's Disease or ulcerative colitis is not what they found."

Narz shook his head. "No. What they did find was a gut full of parasites. I won't go into details here; it's not the time or place," he said glancing around. Fortunately it appeared that nobody at the two nearby table had overheard him. "The thing is, during her weeks spent in agony eleven more people came in. Same initial diagnosis and treatment."

Damon asked, "Did that change once they found out about the first woman?"

Quimby nodded and looked past Damon as their waiter brought their drinks. After taking their dinner orders he left

and the trio sat sipping their beverages. In a few moments Quimby continued.

“Treatment switched for everyone post haste, but they could not determine exactly what the little buggers are. They’re not from any known source. The good thing is that with two exceptions, both very old and in severely weakened conditions, they survived and are getting better. You will appreciate this, Anne. It took a combination of current prescription drugs along with an herb mix containing some sort of mint and wormwood.”

“What do you think I can do about this, Quimby? It’s not even in my back yard.”

“Wrong, Anne. Shopton General has reported twenty-three cases in the past two weeks alone. It’s here!”

Chapter 2

There May Be (Nope... There Is!) Trouble Ahead

THE NEWS was a stunner. There had been, to the Swift’s knowledge, no announcement or news coverage. They decided to table the discussion until the following morning when Anne said she would come down to the lab.

“Well, then, it’s a good thing we didn’t demolish it after you retired,” Narz said with a sad grin. “I’ll see you there at ten.”

“Why ten?”

Now the FBI agent looked perplexed, but he soon laughed. “Sorry. I forgot that you don’t have to get everyone off to school or work before acknowledging that we even exist. I can be there as early as eight-forty-five. I’ve got a teleconference before that. Anyway, the bank doesn’t open until nine.”

The next morning Anne left the house at quarter of nine, driving into downtown and pulling up in front of the Merchants & Co. Bank. While it was an actual working bank it was also the front for a complex of labs and corridors fifty feet below the street level operated by the FBI for more than a quarter century.

She stepped from her car and looked to see what the parking meter would do. She smiled when the red “flag” inside disappeared and a full two hours came up on the screen. It would count down to about fifteen minutes before resetting to another two hours.

It would keep this up until her car moved away.

A teller was just unlocking the front door when Anne walked up the two steps. As she entered the lobby the three tellers and two branch officers all stood up and gave her an

ovation. No words were spoken but a lot of smiles and nods of acknowledgement were given and returned.

Anne stepped to the far left counter and signed in to the safe deposit box vault. The same Asian woman who had opened the front door came over and took her into the back room. There, their two keys were inserted into a special box near the top row of the back wall.

“I’m so happy to see you back, Mrs. Swift,” the woman whispered. “We’ve all missed you.”

Anne didn’t know what to say and so she simply placed a gentle hand on the woman’s shoulder and gave a little squeeze. “Thank you.”

After the bank employee left Anne turned her key back and the entire wall moved backward, sliding to the side to reveal a doorway. She pulled her key out, stepped through, and the wall slid silently into place.

Sitting on the shelf to the right was the complete lack of the customary credit card-sized badge. Instead, she had to laugh as she noticed a TeleVoc pin such as used at Swift Enterprises. She picked it up, used the backing magnet to position it on her shirt collar, and tapped it once.

“Quimby Narz,” she silently intoned. All that was necessary was to use her jaw muscles and to think the person’s name she wanted to speak with, then do the same to sub-vocalize the conversation.

“Yes, Anne? I’m a minute from parking. Go on down and I’ll be there in two,” she heard inside her head. She walked down the long stairway to the hall below and then the fifty feet to the door of what she used to think of as “her lab.”

The door was ajar and she prodded it open a few inches with her purse. Sitting on *her stool* was a tallish man with a very pleasing profile. She walked in, wrapped her arms around his neck and gave him a kiss on the cheek.

“Nigel!” she squealed happily.

Dr. Nigel Drake, an Englishman, was a triple-doctorate researcher she had worked with years earlier when a dinosaur bone find had started killing people. With his background in toxicity and venoms as well as paleontology, he had helped decipher the problem and come up with a solution. It had saved her favorite lab partner, Wiley Oswaldt’s, daughter.

He stood, picked her up and gave her a return squeeze. “Anne. How awfully nice to be here with you again. Can I offer you some of my special brew?” He pointed at a second steaming cup of coffee on the desk. His method of double brewing had become her standard when working in the lab. The secret was to brew a normal pot of coffee and let it get cold, then use that instead of fresh water to brew again using fresh grounds. It packed a wallop but was intriguingly smooth.

“You’re an angel,” she told him as he handed the mug to her.

“Ah, good morning you two,” came Quimby’s voice from the doorway. He noticed the coffee. “You two drinking that muck of Dr. Drake’s?”

“We are,” Anne answered, “and you can’t have any. So,” she turned to face him with a serious look, “why are we here?”

“Well, as I told you and Damon last night, and have partly filled Dr. Drake in on, we have at last count over two hundred cases out west and in this area of parasitic infestation of humans. No known animals so far. All attempts and questioning of the victims has come up empty so far as any connections in locale, foods or other typical origins. We have old, young, anorexic, obese, male, female—and one in between—carnivores, vegetarians and vegans.

The only commonality is that so far we are seeing these in only Arizona and upstate New York.”

“How many new cases per day?”

“Well, Doctor, starting with just about the second victim it has been a steady thirteen to sixteen per week.” He described the treatments tried, and the ones that seemed to be successful.

“Recurrences?” Anne inquired.

This took Narz by surprise. “Yes, and why do you ask? In fact, we’ve got about a fifty percent repeat list.”

“I believe Anne is asking because that might be another line of follow along the questioning path. What have they done the same after being supposedly cured, and what have they done different?”

“And,” Anne added, “we need to get some of these people in here. I need blood panels most hospitals can’t provide or wouldn’t think of. I need gases, stool samples, urine samples, mouth swabs. Anything and everything. In fact, see if you can arrange to find multiple individuals in the same household. If there are a lot of them, then we have an even larger problem. If there are none, then we will probably need to investigate why people aren’t sick in the same house.”

“I can help you there,” Narz told them. “You see, I’m one of the unlucky people. Maybe I’m one of the lucky ones. I got hit pretty hard with this thing, but have had only a slight recurrence!”

Anne was aghast. Nigel Drake merely nodded and bit his lower lip.

“So far,” Narz added.

Anne held up her right index finger. “Quimby,” she said somewhat gently, “take a seat and go over everything you

think of from the weeks before you ended up in, I’m guessing, the hospital.”

The former agent took a stool and closed his eyes. “Well, the CDC people were on this like a shot and raked me over the coals. Standard stuff, but when you are sicker than a dog it really wears on you. Of course, you know that. So, they asked about who I had any contact with, physical contact, in the month prior. That would be about nine men I play golf with on a regular basis and the twelve or thirteen women I helped bust on the prostitution thing. All were no more intimate than handshakes or holding of wrists while placing handcuffs on the ladies.”

He spent the following hour talking through each and every person and event he could recall, even those once he left the hospital. Nigel has switched on a digital recorder before Quimby began, so they had everything down.

“Can you still get us access to CDC and hospital records?”

“It’s as I said, Anne. I never actually retired because the Bureau didn’t want to let me do that, so the answer is yes. But, after this I’m out of here! Write down what you need and from where and I’ll get onto it immediately. Now, I’ve got to run a couple errands. I’ll call in when I know what and when you can expect, and then I’ll be back tomorrow.” He started to get up to leave.

Nigel looked at Anne before placing a hand on the FBI man’s shoulder.

“Sorry, Agent Narz,” he said. “You admitted to being one of the affected and that means you are one of ours, now. We need to have you as a control patient if nothing else. Anne will need blood and tissue samples as well as urine, stool and digestive samples.”

Quimby’s head turned from one to the other of them and back again several times. His mouth hung open and his eyes

had gone wide.

“Is that true, Anne?”

She nodded. “Yep! Our best bet is having you here along with several others in varying stages of the infestation. The more we can see and test, the better our chances. So, I will make sure that you have full phone and computer access, but I need to get you into one of the isolation rooms next door.”

Quimby Narz was not used to being the one ordered around, but he was also a realist and gave them no bigger fight than to suggest someone would need to move his car from the bank parking lot. With that he headed next door, followed by Anne and Nigel. Before going into the first of the isolation rooms he made several calls and got the ball rolling on their requests, and he made the notification to his superiors.

Anne thought she could hear laughter coming from the handset when he admitted he was one of the people with the parasites. His eyes echoed his displeasure at the reaction of his boss, and he hung up a moment later with an embarrassed scowl on his face.

“I will remind you, Anne, and you as well, Doctor Drake, that I have had direct contact with you both. If this is a skin-borne disease or whatever, you may soon find yourself in one of these rooms right along side me!”

Anne stood there thinking a moment before responding. “My gut feeling, pardon the sad pun, is that this is transmitted by mouth. Food, saliva, that sort of thing. A shake of the hand wouldn’t transfer parasites unless they were plainly evident on the infected individual’s skin. Just to be safe, however,” and she reached over to pick up a can, “we have this amazingly great skin disinfectant foam. Here, Nigel.” She sprayed a liberal amount of the pinkish foam

into his outstretched palm before dispensing another large glob in her own hand.

Both of them spread and rubbed the foam around their hands and arms getting under their fingernails and well between their fingers. In a few seconds, the foam turned blue and then disappeared.

“There,” she said to Quimby. “All clean. And now, you get into that room and we close the door. Hopefully it won’t be for very long. There has to be something you all have in common.”

The following mid-morning several large boxes of paper files and a lengthy list of electronic files, plus access information, were delivered.

Quimby had spent the previous twenty-four hours with all the ill grace of a doctor finding him or herself as a patient. Twice he suggested, as their superior, that they needed to release him. Twice Anne had laughed and shaken her head.

“Sorry, Quimby. That door locks from this side, and only I have the code. Now be nice and give Nigel and me some time to go through all of this paperwork.”

She reached the door before turning back. “Quimby? Are you claustrophobic?”

He shook his head. “No. Never in my life. Why?”

“Just wondered. It wouldn’t do you any good to have an episode while cooped up in that room. Of course, now that we know, you can’t go claiming you are just to get out. See you in a few hours!”

Within three hours the two scientists had compiled a growing list of similarities between the first fifty patients out in Arizona. The rate wasn’t encouraging with barely thirty percent overlap in places visited, foods consumed and even

local water supplies. It the source was the water supplies Anne wanted to get those tested first, so she placed a call to the Centers for Disease Control and ordered a set of test samples be taken from the five supply locations covering the greater Phoenix area. They told her the samples would arrive on a next day delivery plane the next afternoon.

While they waited for those, she and Nigel Drake worked to compare the initial thirty or so local cases.

“Why,” she said brushing a wisp of hair from her face, “do you suppose that the only two places so far reporting anything like this are Arizona and upstate New York?”

Nigel’s shoulders slumped a little as he thought over her question. “Not certain, Anne. I’ve been checking small things such as influx of foreign nationals, and find nothing much in common. Out there they see quite a few Mexican citizens; more than any other culture. Here we get fewer than one percent of that.”

Anne nodded. “That’s right. We get Caribbean nationals, Europeans and even Africans, but not very many folks from south of the border. Do any of those share a particular food or ingredient?”

“Hmmm,” he muttered as he perused his list. “Ah, here it is. Onions and variations of the herb oregano.”

Anne laughed at his pronunciation of the word. He said it as if it were *or-ee-gah-no*. When she explained her mirth he shrugged. “Aluminum versus your aluminum. But, we digress. The *oh-reg-ano* used in each is actually a different subspecies. And, most of it is used in dried form which would kill most parasites.”

“Perhaps the adults, but how about parasitic spores?”

“What?” he asked. “Do you mean as in the spores that get inside of ants and take over their bodies, eventually consuming them from the inside?”

She laughed. “No. I suppose that was a shot in the dark. But perhaps there is something associated with foods that can survive processing such as drying or even cooking. I really wish we had a few more people to check. And, speaking of people—even if it is Quimby—do you want to flip a coin to see who goes and gets all his body samples?” She looked at the Brit with hope in her eyes that he would volunteer.

“I barely know the fellow, Anne. I would think that your long term relationship would have you jumping up to rush in there to cause him the embarrassment.”

Anne sighed. “Well, if you put it like that...” She stood up and headed to the room next door.

As she walked in, Quimby looked up from the computer in his isolation room. He had evidently turned on the intercom so the sound of the door alerted him to her presence.

“I’ve just been arranging for you to have at least eight patients to examine. They are in various stages of the... uhh, is it a disease?”

“No, but since we don't know what it is, let’s just call it the ailment.”

“Okay. I think six are in the first go around and two are like me. Had it, got rid of it. Have it again.” He smiled at her, but his expression changed as he watched her pull out various vials, syringes, small sample bottles and other paraphernalia.

With a gulp, he realized they all were meant for him. But, Quimby Narz could rally. He spoke again, telling her, “Theres a little more.”

She turned around. “Wait on that. First tell me when they get here?”

“Oh. That’s the thing, you see. That’s the other bit. The Bureau decided that trooping that many people into Shopton was going to be a major issue, so they have determined the best place to take them is to our new facility in San Bernardino. It’s a combination school for scientists like you plus it has an even more up-to-date facility like this one.”

Anne purposely picked up a syringe and then reached into a drawer to pull out a large bore needle—one meant to be used on large animals such as horses. She made a big show of placing it on the syringe and then moving the plunger up and down in full view of the agent.

“I do not wish to go to California at this time, Quimby. I know my setup here and can put my fingers on anything at any time. It will be bothersome as well as a hinderance to any work if I have to get used to another arrangement.”

Quimby had gone a little green watching her manipulate the syringe. “Wha—wha—what’s that for?” he asked nervously.

“For taking a stool sample,” she lied. If he was going to ship her to California, she wanted him to be as nervous as possible.

Chapter 3

California, Here I Come

THE NEWS hadn’t bothered Damon as much as she might have liked. In fact, when she told him she had to go upstairs to pack he had positively been eager and helpful.

“Do you really want to get rid of me?” she asked in a small voice.

“No, but if I understand you correctly, this will be both an investigation and you get to pass on what you know to a handful of other, young and eager scientists. You’ll be in your element plus you get to delegate a lot of the grunt work to the newbies. I’m not you, but if I was I might see this as a winning situation.”

Anne sat on the side of their bed. “I guess,” she sighed.

The next morning she took off on the morning commuter flight down to Albany. There, a Gulfstream executive jet with U.S. Air Force markings was awaiting her arrival.

Nigel was remaining in Shopton to continue to work with both Quimby as well as three patients from Shopton General who would be arriving at midday.

The Air Force jet was obviously meant for flying dignitaries around the world. It was opulently appointed and came complete with a young woman—a Staff Sergeant by her insignia—who told her that she was there to make the flight as comfortable as possible. Drinks, food, inflight entertainment... anything Anne wished.

Following one of the smoothest touchdowns she had ever experienced, Anne was taken by military limousine from the airport in Ontario along Interstate 10 to Interstate 215 and from there to a small building a few blocks off one of the exits. The structure was fairly nondescript and only had a

small sign on the street indicating that it was:

Freelands Barstow Insalsa Research

Anne snorted as she immediately saw the barely hidden F, B and I in the name. More than thirty cars filled the parking lot next to the building. Her limo pulled around to the back and she was escorted to a door. Inside, a young man in a suit sat at a desk. Behind him stood a rather menacing U.S. Marine in full fighting uniform, complete with a rather wicked-looking rifle strapped across his chest.

She handed over the identification card Quimby had arranged to be in the jet. As the seated man looked at it, the door behind her clanged shut, causing her to jump. This caused the man with the gun to snap it off his chest mount and begin to swing it toward her.

Everyone immediately realized what had happened and, with a shrug and weak grin, the gun went back into place on the Marine's chest and everyone went back to normal.

Two minutes later she was let through the next door that led to a set of stairs that eerily reminded her of the Shopton lab. Things got downright spooky when she found that a door, about fifty feet down the corridor, opened into a lab that looked almost exactly like hers.

Anne walked around the room noting that several of her favorite, but older, pieces of equipment in this room were of the latest model. Even the microscope system built by Swift Enterprises was a couple years newer.

"Do you approve?" a deep, male voice came from behind her. It had exactly the right timber to send a little chill down her spine.

Turning, Anne saw a distinguished man, probably in his sixties but trim and in terrific condition so he might pass for being in his early fifties, standing in the doorway.

"I like this very much. I'm Anne Swift," she said taking a couple steps and extending a hand.

"And, I am Robert Seagrove," he said, not extending his hand. "Please forgive me, and you may well laugh at this, but I am so germophobic that I never shake hands." He laughed. "Yet, here I work in the heart of Germville, California."

She was to find out later that the name was the code for this facility.

"I know a doctor who gets nauseated at the sight of blood, except in the line of work. But, put him in front of a TV and show him an accident on the news, or even fake blood in a show, and he gets queasy and leaves the room." She laughed at the thought.

He laughed as well. It was an honest laugh and she could see in his eyes he was truly amused.

"Well, normally I would offer a tour at this point, but that seems hardly necessary. What I will show you is the expansion over and above your own facility. By that, I mean our school. Currently," he began as he ushered her out the door and farther down the corridor, "we have nine young scientists. Every one of them has, at a minimum, a degree in biology. Six have gone on and received Masters in either Genetics or Microbiology, which I understand is one of your specialties."

She nodded.

"Fine. Fine. Oh, let's double back for a moment. I want to introduce you to our current patients. And you will see that we also have a slightly larger isolation room than you do. We can accommodate up to a dozen."

"I'm impressed," she told him after they had left the isolation room. She had been, especially on seeing the monitor displays of each room's occupant and their status. Anyone in the outer part of the room could see at a glance

each patient's heart rate, respiration and oxygenation levels, medications listings with reminders for next dosages, and about six other readouts.

They reached the door to the other half of the facility. Seagrove stopped and placed a hand on her right wrist.

"I want to warn—well, no, that isn't the right term; I want to advise you that this group includes a know-it-all. You will soon spot this person. I shall leave it up to you whether we dismiss the person or not."

Looking into his eyes to try to find a hidden message, Anne finally shook her head slightly.

"Why leave it up to me? Because I'm the new school mar'm or because you don't have the brass to do it yourself?"

He blushed. Stammering a little, he admitted, "If it were up to me alone I'd have had this person out two weeks ago right on day one, but there is a delicate point regarding having a parent who is fairly highly placed in this state's government. As we have just requested funding for a second facility to be located up in Northern California, and the state is going to foot about eighty percent of the bill, well..."

Anne hated playing politics. She told him this and he apologized putting her on the spot.

She took the door handle in her right hand and pulled it open. On the other side was a small amphitheater, but one unlike anything she had ever seen before.

Each student station covered about an eight-by-twelve-foot space, and featured a comfortable chair with build-in desk, a computer station, and a table that, she discovered by walking up to one, was actually a horizontal high-definition television screen on which video of various bodies and creatures could be viewed. Then, via the use of a 3D headpiece, they could virtually operate on it. Samples could be drawn, tissues taken and even virtual slides prepared.

It was, in a word, flabbergasting.

A soft ding noise sounded and she looked up to see another door pen and her "students" coming in. Anne walked to the front of the room and introduced herself to each of them. Of the nine, seven were men and only two were women. Eight had good, strong handshakes while one of the men, who introduced himself as "Mansfield Mason," gave her hand a soft squeeze before pulling away.

"Mason?" she asked, "As in Lieutenant Governor Mason?"

He smiled and his head bobbed up and down.

"Yep. And, by the by, the best student you've got here. Why, I can dissect rings around these other—"

"And, that will do with the puffery, Mr. Mason," she told him.

"It's *doctor*, if you please, *agent* Swift!"

"And it is *Doctor* Swift, if you please. And, with more skills and less patience than you will ever have!" She grabbed his sleeve and pulled him to the side. "If you ever try to pull that 'treat me better because I think I am privileged' crap again you will be out of this program in about half and instant. Got it?"

He had turned pale, but he nodded and gulped. "Yes, ma'am."

She started the class by explaining to them her methodology. She told them to watch of even the slightest variation or clue.

"This work is rarely easy and quick. It takes the skills of a master detective to hunt down the causes of what you will deal with in possibly ninety-five percent of your cases. What you learned in school is partially relevant, but it will be more what you teach yourselves, the research you do into far too

many things, and your ability to call up minute knowledge when needed that will make you a success.”

Two hours of lecture behind her, Anne told them to take a three-minute break and then to assemble in the lab.

“But, we get fifteen minute breaks, “Mansfield Mason whined. “You can’t get a smoke break done if three minutes.”

Anne stared at him until he looked away. “If that is the case, Doctor, then I suggest that you go upstairs, outside, light up and then get in your car and drive away. We reconvene in two-and-three-quarter minutes in the lab.”

As she turned she saw that Robert Seagrove had come into the room via the door to the hallway. He nodded imperceptibly at her, and she knew Mason was the troublemaker.

Inside the lab she told the group how she preferred to work. She told them everything from protocols developed by others and those she had created herself. She repeatedly told them about proper containment and handling of any and all specimens.

“But, what if you already know something is transmitted by, say, fluids, Doctor Swift? Do you really have to go to all the hassle of stoppering a sample bottle, sealing that, and transferring it through all of the secure tubes and ducts?” This came from one of the two women, a blonde who reminded her a little of her own daughter, Sandy.

“Well,” Anne started as she moved closer to the young woman, “let’s just say that—” and she pretended to trip over something sending the last dregs of coffee in the cup she was holding onto the woman’s smock. “Oops! Guess I had a little accident.” She looked at the shocked woman in time to watch her anger change to realization.

“Sorry that was such a clumsy explanation, but I’d rather

douse you with coffee today than have you or any others be exposed to something that could have been prevented with proper specimen handling.”

By the end of that first afternoon both Anne and her students were exhausted mentally, and Anne physically. As they prepared to leave the lab, she told them, “Tomorrow we meet in the classroom for a few minutes and then we begin to tackle our patients and their illness.”

She spent several hours back in the lab looking through a report Nigel had filed back in Shopton.

Quimby had been joined by two other people, both women and, according to the Brit, both young, pretty and distracting. She had to grin at the mental image of Quimby Narz sitting up in his bed trying to look all macho and strong.

There was still nothing he could point to that might be common among all of them other than each having a digestive tract infested with parasites. The cocktail of medicines he was giving them kept the parasites from reproducing and slowly was reducing their numbers, but one thing that had come out of the hospital reports said that those who were given the higher doses of the meds, and saw their parasites disappear the quickest, were the ones most likely to have a recurrence. Like Quimby.

She typed a few comments on his notes, sent a personal message of support to him, and suggested they pool information.

“I will have my computer files automatically directed to the computers there in Shopton,” she wrote at the end.

She and Damon talked for half an hour before she fell into bed in the motel she had been taken to. It was just three blocks from the facility.

When she was face-to-face with the students the next

morning she told them, “Today, we dive into the deep end. I will be handing out verbal assignments as we go along. Until I get to each of you I want you to stand back and take mental notes. This learning experience is going to be almost totally practical from this point on.”

The first order of business was to collect blood, urine, fecal, and saliva samples from each of their patients. Anne had to admonish—quietly and semi-privately—two of her students about their demeanor with the patients.

“Give them a smile and a little conversation,” she told them. “Get to know, and remember, their names. Make them emotionally comfortable. They are people first and foremost, then patients and only at the very end are they experimental subjects!”

Getting the samples required each student figure out the waldoes—the manipulation arms that were controlled from outside and mimicked their own motions.

With the samples taken and properly labeled, each set was placed in the delivery devices sitting against the back wall that separated each isolation room from the unseen and unmanned area behind. Once they were in, Anne made certain the students had her attention. And, even though none of them had come in physical contact she had them use the pink disinfectant foam.

“Another waste of taxpayer money,” muttered Mansfield Mason. Anne caught it and confronted him while the others left for go to the lab room.

“I can think of a great savings of taxpayer money, Doctor. That would be to boot you from this program saving untold tens of thousands of dollars and making everyone’s lives easier. What do you think?”

“You can’t do that,” he returned looking very sure of himself. “My father won’t let you. So there!”

Anne was steaming angry and did something she would never have done earlier in her career.

“Let’s go call your father and explain what a pain you are being, how you don’t exhibit any true skills in this field, and how I believe you are a waste of ‘taxpayer money.’ Okay?” She headed for the door. Stopping with it open she made a finger motion to him to follow. He stood rooted to the spot, now looking like he was about to faint.

“I’m sorry,” he whispered.

Anne shook her head and walked down the hall to the lab.

Randomly putting everyone into three groups of two plus one with three, she assigned the duos specific stations and tasks. While one of each group would operate whatever the equipment or perform the specific tests, the other would take as many detailed notes as possible.

The trio were given the task of going through more and more of the notes regarding each patient’s potential exposure.

I want you three back in the isolation room interviewing them all. They may push back telling you that they’ve already told people, but assure them that some insignificant detail from each of them is still missing and you only want to get to that so others will not suffer their condition.”

It turned out to be a long day. As did the next one and the one following that.

But that fourth day also brought disaster.

One of the two female scientists began to show symptoms of the infestation. She came in complaining of abdominal cramps and was sweating with a slight temperature. Her eyes were rimmed in red and she said she felt like vomiting.

“Must be pregnant,” Mansfield Mason piped up looking around to see if anyone was going to laugh at his wit. Anne,

like the others, scowled at him. Unlike the others, she grabbed his smock and dragged him into the hall.

“This is your last warning. Are you hearing me? You have been a disruption at all the most inappropriate moments throughout this week. I’ve overheard you correcting others in the class. You are frequently incorrect and always wrong to do so. From this point on you will say nothing to the others not directly having to do with the work. You will not make snide or rude comments. In fact, you will tow the line completely and utterly or you are out.”

She took a cleansing breath, straightened her own smock, and walked back into the lab.

Dierde Johnson, the stricken woman, was taken to one of the free isolation chambers and placed into the bed. Her partner over the past few days stood forlornly outside talking to her via the intercom. He was trying to give her words of encouragement, but the emotion of the moment kept getting the better of him.

Anne suggested that one of the others should go ahead and take the first round of samples, but he stood up to his full six-for-three height; that had told her it needed to be him.

“Okay, but get on it pronto. It will give us information we’ve not been able to get in any of the other cases.”

Chapter 4: Diving Into Danger

EXACTLY, as Anne feared, Dierdre’s stool sample showed the same infestation of parasites as the others.

There were some, well, not unique, but different markers in her blood, and Anne assigned one of the pairs to investigate that.

When she was told about the parasites, Dierdre wailed, “That, on top of getting fat again? I can’t take it!” She cried for over twenty minutes, only stopping when she had tired herself so much that she fell asleep.

Anne had another of her students, the other female, administer an antihelmintic combination of Tiabendazole and Praziquantel, two strong medications in the fight against a variety of worms known to be infectious in the human gut.

These had proven to help other patients, but anyone not receiving the proper, weight and gender-based dosages of the drugs, tended to be the ones who relapsed.

Some of the data that had been gathered from other patients indicated that about half of those infected developed schistosomiasis. The only problem there, making diagnosis difficult, was the only partial spread of the disease.

Also, as Anne told her class when they met that late afternoon to debrief, “Schistosomiasis is common in those infected with flukeworms, but we’ve seen no sign of those in any of the samples. In fact, we’ve seen only a few of the symptoms of schistosomiasis, such as small amounts of blood in some stool samples, but nobody seems to be suffering liver damage or kidney failure like you would expect.”

She looked around. Now might be a good “teaching” moment.

“Who can tell me more about schistosomiasis?”

Always seemingly ready to show off, Mansfield Mason stood up and began speaking.

“Well, it’s spread through contact with water containing the parasites. I’m told this comes from some type of snail living in the water. It happens a lot in developing countries where they have unsanitary water.”

He stood there looking as if he expected praise. “Who else?”

“What?”

Anne tutted. “Who else can become infected?” she asked in the same tone she would generally use when asking a small child something.

“Ummm,” Mansfield stammered.

“Anyone else?” When nobody raised a hand, Anne said, “Fishermen, farmers, cattle ranchers, and even sewage workers. Anybody, in fact, who comes in regular contact with infected water.

Everyone with the exception of Mansfield Mason were taking notes. He was looking around at them, seemingly unable to sit down.

“Yes, Doctor Mason,” she asked. “Was there something else you wanted to say? He stood, looking helplessly around himself, gradually turning more and more pale. Seeing that he was now wavering in place she demanded, “Someone grab Mason. He’s looking like he’s about to faint!”

Three pairs of hands grabbed the man and gently eased him to the floor. He grabbed at his stomach for a moment before vomiting.

“Stay clear of that!” she shouted at them. “Get him into isolation, stat!” She barked out a series of orders to the class, each one carried out but with some level of fear on everyone’s faces.

An hour later Mason had to be sedated his intestinal cramping was so severe. Even with the use of the waldoes to take all the samples, the students were apprehensive about being anywhere close to one of the infected patients.

“If we get just one more in here, we’ll have to double up,” noted the class’ Irish attendee, Cavin O’Donohue.

Anne was about to admonish him when she changed her mind.

“Get me fresh samples from everyone except Dierdre and Mansfield. I want endoscopic sampling this time straight from the upper gut, not the exit end.”

Three of their patients agreed to the procedure without anesthetic. The others required being knocked out for the procedure.

The lab had only two endoscopes, so it took several hours before Anne’s request had been completed. By then it was going past seven, everybody was tired and two others looked decidedly pale.

Anne had everyone take an oral dose of Mebendazole as a precautionary measure. If they were infested this might help stave off any increase. In light cases it could even kill off the parasites.

Soon after they self-dosed, another of the students complained of cramping. His vital signs indicated he was in distress and the pain was increasing. He refused painkillers but did go into the last empty isolation room bed.

The nightly rotation usually had three of the students remaining in the vicinity of the isolation room with one of

them actively inside, awake, while the other two napped in a room off the break room. With this many cases Anne asked for another volunteer.

“I’ll do it,” O’Donohue said. “It was my night to be sober so the whisky will stretch, anyhow!” When Anne looked at him quizzically, he smiled. “Little Irish joke,” he explained.

“If anyone needs me I will be in the lab trying to figure out exactly what this parasite is. So far nobody has definitely identified it,” Anne told the group before those “off duty” headed to have dinner and go to bed.

Half an hour later her cell phone rang. It was the facility’s FBI man, Robert Seagrove.

“I’ve been told that you have somewhat of a pandemic going on down there, Anne. Tell me what the truth is.”

“Well, Robert, we have the original patients you preloaded the facility with before I arrived, and now two of our students have come down with this parasite thing. It’s looking as if you may need to declare isolation of the entire building until we figure this out.”

“Not good. Not good at all,” he commented. “Have you spoken with your counterpart in New York? I hear that Agent Narz had taken a turn for the worse. Don’t want to alarm you, but anything you two can share might turn the tide on this.”

Anne’s shoulders slumped. As much as she had some antagonistic interactions with Quimby Narz, the deep down truth was that she like him as a person. To hear he was worse than when she left just a few days ago hurt.

“I’ll call right after I ask you to find me a really top notch Parasitologist. It’s one field I didn’t get much study on as it only was really getting known about the time I graduated.”

He agreed to find her an expert. She thanked him, hung

up, and dialed her lab. It was nearing midnight in Shopton and she didn’t really expect an answer.

“Drake here. Who you there?” he asked in a sleepy tone.

“It’s Anne, Nigel. I’ve got problems and I hear you might as well.”

She heard him clearing his throat a couple times. “Anne? Can you hold while I grab another cup of coffee? Thanks!” he said in one continuous string of words, setting the receiver on the desk before she had the chance to respond. He was back in about a minute.

“Okay. Better now. Uhhh, let me see. I guess you’ve heard that Quimby took a downturn today. Blood pressure dropped to 85 over 50 and he lost consciousness. Blood in his urine and stool. No kidney troubles but his systems just wanted to shut down.”

Anne stifled a couple of sobs. She knew what was coming next and dreaded hearing the words.

“He’s up and around now, complaining over everything!”

With a gasp of joy, Anne broke down and cried. Nigel gave her a moment.

“He’s okay? I mean, he didn’t die?” she asked feeling foolish for even asking.

“That’s right. Despite all my attempts to rid us of Quimby Narz, he went and got mostly better on me. Here’s the secret: equal proportions of Diethylcarbamazine, bromine, and Praziquantel in about one-hundred milliliters of water and twenty milliliters of fresh garlic juice. I was doing some research on crazy home remedies and arrived at that mixture. I had to put a tube into his stomach, but an hour later his BP rose to 118 over 75, his breathing became regular and within a minute of that he opened his eyes.”

So relieved she almost couldn’t think straight, she finally

asked, “Have you given that to any of the other guests?”

He laughed. “Yes, but all that concentrated garlic made a few of them gag. I finally added some artificial sweetener from the coffee room for two of them. But, they are doing much better. I intend to grab a few hours of kip in the other room before taking more gut samples in the morning.”

“You do that and call me at about, oh, your noon. If you can, that is. I’ve got to order some of the garlic and bromine but have the other two. Oh, Nigel, I am so happy. Now, as long as it works to rid the gut of the parasites all we have to do is find the reason for all this.”

She called Seagrove to tell him what she required then tried to concentrate on her research, but fifty minutes later she went to the break room, found one of the cots still empty, and laid down. She was asleep in seconds.

A hand was jostling her shoulder.

Anne looked up into the smiling face of Cabin Nigel.

“Good morning to ya, Doctor,” he said. “I hope ya don’t mind but I was told ta get ya to the phone. It’s some feller name of Drake. Sounded sorta English ta me, but there ya go. He says it’s important.”

She thanked him and rose from the bunk noting that these were just an uncomfortable after a few hours as the ones in Shopton.

“Nigel? It’s Anne,” she said as she picked up the receiver in the lab.

“Ay, I know it is a few hours shy of the agreed on noon—” she looked at her watch seeing that it had just turned seven a.m., “—but we’ve had a breakthrough. So much so that I want to let you speak to someone.”

There came the sound of the handset being handed over.

“Anne, it’s Quimby. I don’t know how much we’re paying

Doctor Drake here, but it isn’t enough by half. He says I’ve still got a gut full of the things, but most are dead or dying so all I may need is a good flush out!”

Anne smirked at his enthusiasm for what he would later think of as a most miserable experience.

“That’s wonderful, Quimby. And, I am very happy you are still with us. The very best of luck on the flush out, too. Did you have any questions for me?”

“No,” he relied still sounding unreasonably happy for a man who was about to go through the same thirty-six hour cleansing as someone about to undergo a thorough colon examination. “Here’s Drake. Oh, can’t await to get you back here, Anne. Thanks!”

She would have liked him to remain on the line long enough for her to remind him that this was a one-time things for her, but Nigel’s voice come on.

“He just went down the hall to have a glass of juice. I didn’t have the heart to tell him what he is about to start. Do you think he will go home later, bring his weapon back and shoot me?”

“No, but it will away wipe any grin he has on his face right now. Please tell me this is curing things.”

He chuckled. “Under the SwiftScope of yours I see nothing but dead or soon-to-be dead adult parasites, and the eggs all seem to have ruptured. I don’t want to provide false hope on this, and only once I flush Agent Narz and the others entire digestive tracts out will I know, but that naturopathic website I found may actually hold a bit of genius in and amongst the general quackery of that area of practice.”

“Well, I spent two hours last night, well, night before last that is, looking up potential Chinese herbal remedies. I guess we take what we can git. “

“Right, but it still doesn’t give us the source. Hopefully it buys us enough time.”

Anne told him that was her hope as well.

By eight the medicine and garlic concoction had been mixed and was ready to be administered. Anne went into the outer isolation room and turned on the general intercom. Only one person, Mansfield Mason, did not wake up. He was still sedated for his pain.

“Well, I want to thank everyone for their patience on this. It is something we’ve never run up against and not being able to find any common thread in how you might have contracted this, it has taken time. But, we believe we have something that should help eradicate the parasites. I have to warn you that it has a very strong taste, Anyone who cannot swallow it will, unfortunately, have to get a tube up your noses and down into your stomachs.”

She waited for the general grumbling to subside.

“In the test case, someone in another facility who was a repeat customer, as it were, who had gone into general body failure was brought out of that and is up and walking in under twenty-four hours.”

This news got their attention back to thinking about the positives side of things.

She described what they would be going through during the next two days but said she believed they could all come out of their individual rooms and be together in the larger room for a good portion of that time.

One man, the oldest of the group and someone who had been among the grumblers, declared, “I’ve been through five of those damnable colonoscopies. First one was twenty-six years ago and we used to have to go without food, just water, for three days and drink something called ‘salts.’ Then we dosed up on laxatives for another day or so before the tube

went up. One day of this plus all that water she says we’ll have to drink ain’t nothing! Gimme the goop, Doc.”

“That’s the spirit!” she complimented him.

The same people who had to be knocked out before they could be endoscoped had to be sedated before they could “swallow” the feeding tube. But, within the hour everyone had been given their dose of the concoction. Even Mansfield had been moved into a sitting position, the tube inserted, and his dose dispensed down the clear tube.

As had been hoped for, by the next morning everyone was up and around—frequently running for the bathrooms due to the cathartic drinks they also had to take—discussing how good they suddenly were feeling... and then running for the bathrooms again.

While most of her students were tending to their patients, Anne and Cavin were worrying over Mansfield Mason. In spite of the medication, he was still unconscious. This made necessary the use of adult diapers. His heart rate, breathing and temperature were normal. They didn’t know what was going on with the tall young man.

Anne excused herself to go back to doing some research. She had personally re-interviewed five of the previous patients, and now wanted to have some time alone with Dierdre.

The young woman looked as if she were happy on the outside but conflicted inside.

“What is it?” Anne inquired.

“Nothing, Ma’am. Just feeling a little anxious in my intestines, if you know what I mean.”

“So, you’ve heard the litany of questions. Let’s get your responses starting with anything you and Mansfield and then Peter Bolton might have done or eaten or been exposed

to.”

“You mean other than all those other sick people?”

“Yes. The gestation period for most parasites means you would have all had something in common at least five days before I arrived here. That would make it three to four days before the first of the original patients arrived.” She looked encouragingly at the young woman.

What should have taken an hour required three with all the breaks Dierdre needed. In the end, and no closer to a solution, both Anne and the younger woman were exhausted.

Anne left the isolation facility to find Agent Seagrove waiting for her.

“We need to talk,” he said as he crooked a finger toward her.

Chapter 5: Divide, Conquer, and Vamoose!

“ARE YOU certain that this can’t get out if I allow you to come upstairs to my office?” he asked, looking pensively at Anne.

She was tired and discouraged. Certainly it was good to have a cure but if the disease ran rampant, or went to pandemic state as Seagrove had only mildly been kidding about earlier, what would they do then?

“I am as certain as I can be on something we appear to have conquered in our individual patients—” She stopped. “There is one we aren’t certain about. It’s the politician’s kid, Mansfield Mason. He evidently came down with the parasites, has been given the medicine, but we needed to sedate him for his intense pain and he hasn’t come out of that yet.”

Robert Seagrove swept his hand forward. “Let’s go up to my office,” he said in a resigned tone.

When Anne was seated in a very nice red leather chair across the desk from the agent, he offered her a drink. “I have everything from water—still and sparkling—to soda pops to the hard stuff. Including a particularly excellent smoky single malt whisky.” He waited for her answer.

“Anything stronger than a good, cola flavored beverage would probably knock me out.” A minute later he set the drink in front of her.

He sat down and sighed. “We have a problem, don’t we?”

“That, Robert, depends on what your definition of ‘problem’ is,” she responded. “For instance, if you mean we have a cure but not a culprit, then we do have a problem. If you mean how do we keep all the fine people down there

quiet about what they have been through so panic doesn't run rampant through the streets, then it is only *you* who has a problem. I'm just scientist for hire."

He shook his head. "I was referring to Doctor Mason. I can only hold off notifying his family for a brief period. Daddy is getting impatient because mommy has been getting little messages from her little Mannie—as I've overheard her call him—telling her about how everybody is treating him mean. Poor snookums!" he said with disgust. "What do I say?"

She looked at him as if he was an intriguing amoeba or other curiosity. "I'm neither politician nor am I a diplomat. I suspect you need to be a bit of both, but probably you need to wait until I can get a couple hours of sleep and do a full assessment of his condition. So," she said standing and draining her glass, "I am going down to give my class some orders, then will be zonked out until, hmmm," she looked at her watch, "let's say five tonight."

Once she woke up and showered, she felt much better and ready to tackle a late night of research. First, however—and was reminded of by a note taped to her door from Seagrove—she needed to look into the Mason case.

Most of the other patients were taking naps having run themselves to the point of collapse with all the bathroom visits. Mansfield Mason lay, snoring, on his back in his bed. She touched his shoulder trying not to startle him. He didn't move. Next she shook the shoulder gently. Again, no reaction. She was about to put on her stethoscope when she noticed something.

The water glass next to his bed was empty. She knew it had been full hours earlier because Cavin had filled it while they were in the room together.

Anne leaned down so that her lips were an inch from

Mason's ear.

"You have exactly one minute to get those eyes open, swing your legs out of bed and request that I leave this room while you get dressed. Then, you will have five minutes to pack. You are so out of this program you son of a— you little jerk! And, boy-oh-boy is it gonna play the devil with your dad's plans to run for Governor!"

Mansfield Mason's eyes shot open. There was a genuine look of panic in them as he sat up.

"I was only typing to get a little more sleep," he whinged. "You can't kick me out. I can tell you how the bugs got into us! I swear I know!"

Anne pulled her cellphone from her jacket pocket and dialed a number. "Robert? Anne. Get down to the Iso-ward, Out little malingerer has something to tell us." She hung up and put her index finger to her mouth. "Be a good little boy and keep your lips shut for a few minutes," she cautioned. Turning to leave the room she paused, turned back and reached over to relieved him of the cell phone he just pulled from who knew where. "I'll be taking that. Get dressed!"

Seagrove arrived a minute later and they waited until the door opened and Mansfield Mason, head hanging low, asked them to come in.

"If I go then I want you to also consider sending that bitch, Dierdre packing. She's behind this thing!"

Anne was stunned to silence. Robert's eyes bugged out as he tried to stare a hole through the man on the bed. Mason simply shrugged and sat there.

Finally, Agent Seagrove spoke. His tone was menacing but even and calm. "And, what do you mean by that?"

Mason shrugged again. "Only that she is the one who gave me those infernal diet pills. I was just fine until I took

those. She took her first one the day before I started, and she came down with this the day before. I think she also talked Peter into taking them because he was complaining about needing to lose thirty pounds before his wedding.”

They stared at him before Anne said, “You will have to give us any of those you still have.”

“Can’t.”

“Do you mean you won’t?” Seagrove growled.

“No,” Mason stated standing up and looking down at the shorter man. “I said ‘can’t’ and that’s what I meant. I had a full months worth, but as soon as she started to feel sick she told me to give them back. Said she got some kind of recall notice that they might cause stomach cramps in some people. Cramps! Ha! Insert huge laugh here.”

He looked forlorn.

“Let me get this straight,” Seagrove said. “You take some diet pills from this woman, who you barely know, and she—”

Anne interrupted him. “But you do know her, don’t you Mansfield? Or at least you’re on more than a casual relationship. Isn’t that right?”

Nodding, he told her, “Yeah. We met the first day here. That would be...” he looked at Seagrove, “...nine weeks ago?” The agent nodded. “Yeah. At first she didn’t give me the time of day no matter how hard I tried to impress her. In case you didn’t notice I can be a bit overbearing.” He smiled. They didn’t.

“So, you kept chatting her up. What changed?”

“We, Doctor Swift, I guess she overheard me talking to one of the others about my father and how he’s the Lieutenant Governor and how I hoped to finish this course so I could go home to Yreka and help him with the final weeks of the campaign for Governor.”

Anne smiled at him, pity in her eyes. “Right after that I suppose she warmed to you?”

He appeared to be confused, but he soon brightened. “Yeah! That’s exactly what happened. After that I couldn’t keep her off me when we weren’t working.” He blushed. “She even used to tweak my butt when she walked behind me.” He kept on blushing.

“So, when did she give you the pills, and why in the world would you take something like that? You’re hardly a poster child for weight problems,” Anne told him.

Mason looked at the ceiling as if trying to locate the answer up there. He looked at Anne. “If you’ll give me my phone back I can look it up. I kinda keep notes on everything I eat. Guess she spotted that and used it against me. She told me I was feeling a little pudgy around the waistline and that she had just the thing.”

Anne dug his phone out and handed it to him. He spent a minute calling up a diary program and soon located the entry. “Right,” he counted the days. “Thirteen days ago. Oh, yeah. She would have been at two weeks today.”

Seagrove turned to Anne. “We have to confront her about this. One thing I don’t understand is how the other fellow, Peter, could have come down with this. Well, guess we take both of them upstairs.”

Anne told him about the purging every patient was going through and the need for rather frequent toilet visits.

“Tell ‘em to climb into diapers!” he said and left the room.

Ten minutes later a very confused young man and a sullen young woman were facing Robert Seagrove and Anne in the agent’s office.

“Now, I’d tell you to take a seat,” he said to them, a tiny twitch of a smile playing in the corners of his mouth, “but I

don't want to get the furniture dirty. So, you both stand. You," he said pointing at Dierdre, "had better have a great explanation for passing around pills. That is so incredibly stupid as well as being illegal. So, what have you got to say for yourself?"

"I want a lawyer," she stated, not looking up.

"Isn't that nice. You want a lawyer. Well, as I am not a police officer, and you are not under arrest, you don't get one! You are, however, under investigation by the Federal Bureau of Investigation for being in gross violation of your contract and your oath taken before you became a junior agent. As such, I can haul your keaster into a holding cell and keep you there until we can take you in front of a Federal judge. Possible as long as three months. Liking it so far, missy?"

Her jaw has set and she looked as if she didn't care. Peter, on the other hand, was more than willing to talk.

"She gave Mason and me the pills after she found out about our fathers. His is the assistant Governor, or something like that, here in California. My dad's the head of ArcticBank up in Alaska." He indicated Dierdre with a tilt of his head. "She told me she loved me and wanted to ruin his father's chances. She planned to go to the papers and television people—"

"Shut up, you stupid moron!" she screamed at him. "He's lying to save his skin. I didn't do anything. I'm... uhhh... I'm being framed by those two. I swear!"

Seagrove got up and walked around his desk. As he neared Dierdre she seemed to shrink as if she thought he might hit her.

"Lemme say this once, and only once. You will not open your yap until I or Agent/Doctor Swift here specifically ask you to speak. If you *do* open your mouth, I will have another

agent in here to gag you and shackle you to that chair. So," he said turning and walking back to take his seat, "I believe Mr. Bolton was saying something about a statement you made in his presence. And, I remind you that as an agent of the FBI, junior as you both might be, anything you say to each other is an official statement in times like these. Go, Peter," he directed, pointing at the now sweating man.

In a hoarse whisper, Peter asked, "Can I go first?" He started to look desperate.

Seagrove nodded. "You take the one across the hall. And if Agent Swift doesn't mind accompanying our little poisoner here, it would be the one at the end of the hall."

Anne and Dierdre came back a minute after Peter returned. He was now sitting. The young agent tried to sit but a bark from Seagrove put her back at attention.

"So, sir, and Agent Swift, I was telling you that she said she wanted to ruin Mason's father's hopes for Governor. Said it was an old family grudge and for me to just keep it between us. I suppose I did a stupid thing believing that she loved me." His head hung down to his chest.

Anne softly said, "Lots of people do lots of silly, foolish, stupid and even deadly things for love." Turning to Dierdre, she said in a rather harsh voice, "Where did you get those pills? And, what's in them?"

The woman didn't look as if she would answer but she suddenly sat down and stared at Anne. "The mail. I ordered them through the mail. They're supposed to be the latest diet craze. At least in Arizona and New York. I don't think they ship to anywhere else."

Looking at Robert, Anne stated, "And, the other shoe drops. Nearly all the cases have been in either Arizona or upstate New York." Looking back at Dierdre she demanded, "What is the name of the company?"

She mumbled something. Anne slapped her hands together in front of the woman's face, startling her so much that she lost control of her bladder.

Seagrove looked disgusted. "Cleaning that comes out of your final paycheck!"

"What... is... the... name of that damn company? Speak up!"

"Something like CytoLoss. They're out of Prescott. The address is a mail box at one of those private companies. I lost the address a few weeks ago."

"Do you have any more of those pills?" Anne asked, now in a calmer voice. "We need to see what's in them."

Dierdre shook her head. "I got rid of them as soon as I started to feel the cramps. It's funny because I never felt too bad the first month I took them."

A knock sounded at the door. Another man Anne had not seen poked his head inside. "We found something in her locker," he said.

Dierdre let out a shriek and yelled, "You have no right —"

"We have every right!" Seagrove shot back. "Our facility, our rules and one of those is we have the right to search possessions if we feel something is not right. Now, sit back down in that puddle you made. I notified the agent here to go search your room when you left to use the potty."

Dierdre began to cry. To Anne it seemed like she was being phony like trying to cry her way out of a traffic ticket. But, she said nothing.

"And, what is this?" SEagrove asked holding up three flat blister-style packs rubber banded together. "Why, the label on this top package says 'Lose weight the healthy way, one month at a time, with Cytoloss.' And," he said pulling the band off and looking at the other packs, "so do these other

two. Now, I am going to turn these over to see how many of these pills you have."

He did so but discovered he had to slide the inner pack out of the sleeve.

"Hmmm. Looks like two weeks or so on the top two and about three weeks on the other. Which one is yours?"

Dierdre would say nothing more, but Peter said that she had once told him her cycle was a week off from his.

Seagrove handed Anne the packs, "Please go downstairs and test these, Anne. When do you think we might have some answer as to what is inside these?"

"Well," she replied, "there are two types of pills in here. It looks like about twenty-six of one type and the final two are different. They are noted as being the 'cleansing capsules' in the pack. I'll let you know what both of these mean by breakfast tomorrow."

Peter was turned loose but told to remain in his room until notified otherwise. Dierdre was escorted to her room, and it was locked from the outside so she could not leave.

The answers Anne needed to get came quickly. She was able to give her report to Robert Seagrove just before dinner.

"The majority of the pills contain an entirely new type of parasite cyst, or egg. The adult is unlike anything on record, but appears to perhaps be a genetic mutation between a type of fluke and a roundworm. The outside is just a starchy covering so they get down and can drift into the lower stomach, even into the upper GI tract, before it dissolves."

"What about the other two?"

Anne laughed. "Bromide and concentrated garlic juice! Just like we gave people to kill off the parasites. My guess is whoever makes these knows about the dangers of parasitic infestation and uses the garlic/bromide pills to kill off most

of the parasites. They naturally are expelled from the body over the next week or so before the next batch of pills start to hatch.”

“But, to what end?” he asked.

“The parasites eat and eat and eat but barely excrete anything as they work up to making more parasite eggs. Before that can happen, they are killed and excreted, taking probably about three pounds of weight with them.”

She showed him the paper insert from a pack.

“Look. It even says, ‘Most loss will occur after taking the cleansing capsules at the end of each month. Until then, your fat is held in special microbead containers waiting for the herbal infusion of the cleansing capsules to let them escape. You will lose three to four pounds each and every month until you reach your desired goal.’ What a bunch of crap!”

Someone cleared their throat behind Anne. She turned to see it was Mansfield Mason.

“Uh, am I interrupting a meeting?”

“No,” she told him. “We’d just finished. What did you want?”

He looked forward at the wall behind and above Seagrove’s head. “I wish to let you know that I must, regretfully, remove myself from this program, sir. My conduct has been terrible and I do not believe that the Bureau would wish to waste any more funding on me.”

Agent Seagrove looked at Anne. She rolled her eyes but made a small wink at the agent.

Seagrove stood up, and Mason’s eyes lowered to look at him directly.

“Mason, you are a buffoon and probably a congenital idiot. I know your father’s politics make him out to be one. I can’t imagine how bad this state would become if he were

elected. But, perhaps, like you, he might grow in the position. Anyway, we’ve spent far too much money on you already to let you just slip out like a scolded dog. So, your rather pitiful resignation is rejected. You and everyone else with the exception of Dierdre Johnson go on three days of leave starting tomorrow morning. At that time you will have a new instructor. An English fellow from what I’ve been told. Anne might be able to tell you all about him, but she will be heading home first thing in the morning.

The same airwoman who had flown Anne out to California was waiting when she boarded the Gulfstream at eight the following day. She handed Anne a copy of the Los Angeles Times, telling her, “It’s great to have you back aboard, Mrs. Swift. I received a call from Agent Seagrove asking me to give that to you and suggesting you may find a story on page two interesting. Also, I have a tall cola waiting for you.” She smiled.

“By all means, bring it on. Thank you Staff Sergeant. Uhh, can I call you by your first name?”

“It’s Sandra,” the girl told her. “Sandra Saldana”

Anne smiled back.

While Sandra got her cola, Anne turned the page and looked for a story that might interest her. In the lower right corner, just one column wide and about four inches long was one that had the headline:

Illegal Diet Drug Company Raided In Arizona

Anne, smiled again and kept smiling until after the jet had passed into Nevada airspace.

EPILOG:

Anne sighed. She had been sitting at the dinner table across from the man she loved, not knowing what to do with herself. She realized that he had been so right to have her take the teaching assignment, but so wrong in that he couldn't realize how it affected her.

Inside. Deep where it didn't show.

It had been almost two weeks since she came home and she had not said much about the job.

Damon looked up from a forkfull of her home made sloppy joe. Her eyes may have been pointed in his direction, but he knew that he could make a face at her and she wouldn't see it. Not right now. Maybe not even tomorrow.

The first time he had seen this look had been after one case she had taken—forcing her to leave a family vacation in Hawaii—involving some sort of insect problem. His Chief of Security, Harlan Ames, had only been able to tell him that Anne and her young partner had been shot at. Not hit, just had a single bullet hit right in front of her feet.

That had changed her. Before, and for the short time he had actually known about her double life, she had flourished by having something to do in her chosen profession, a profession she had given up to be mother to their children and an incredible wife to him. After that assignment—she had quit after the incident, but that hadn't held for even a full year—she was more quiet. Not withdrawn, but certainly not full of the excitement of the hunt for clues to solve her earlier cases.

Damon reached across the table and placed his right hand on her left wrist. It took a few seconds before she registered the contact, but her eyes focused on his and she smiled.

“I won't ask you to tell me what's going on, but I want you to know that I love you and I am here for you,” he told her.

She tried to smile but her face turned inward and the tears began to cascade down her cheeks.

By the time he managed to scoot around to the chair next to her, her body was racked with strong sobbing, her shoulders rising and falling.

Damon Swift held his wife until the crying finished, and then he picked her up in his arms and carried her upstairs.