

# Anne Swift: Making the Molecular Biological Detective

BY

T. Edward Fox

AUTHOR OF: The Anne Swift Mysteries, as well as, "Oh, My Aching Back, or A Honeymoon in a House on Wheels: The Mary Nestor (Swift) Diaries," "Chow Winkler: The Chili and The Challenger," and writing as Victor Appleton II, "Tom Swift and His EnvirOzone Revivicator," "Tom Swift and His QuieTurbine SkyLiner," Etc., Etc.

How the mother of Tom Swift became a secret scientist for the Federal Bureau of Investigation, and solved a deadly mystery on her very first case!

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**Dedicaton:** To the man who invented Anne Swift for his own *Tom Swift Lives!* series, Scott Dickerson. He's the one who gave her the advanced degrees; I'm just the one who built her work environment based on his mention of her schooling.

And, to the real Bre Parries. Thanks for the coffee and the hugs!  
Both were needed.

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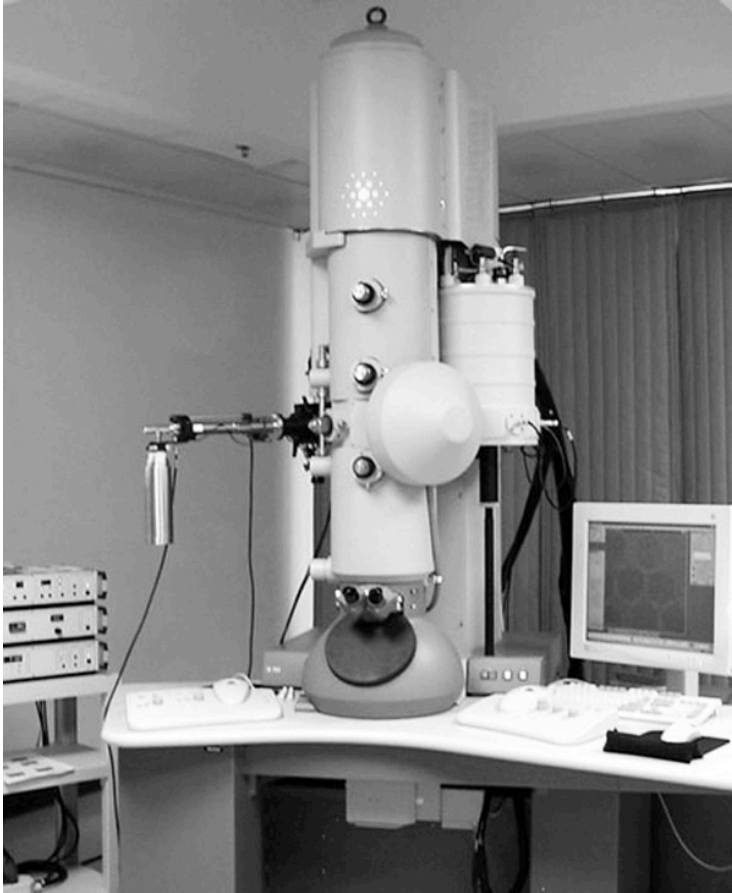
While many readers will already know of Anne Swift's exploits as a secret scientist (part time only, please!) for the FBI, the story of how she became a MoBiDet (Molecular Biological Detective) has not yet been told. And, as the old cliché goes, "... until now!"

This story takes her from her years in a private girls high school through her courtship, marriage and the beginnings of married life with the man who would soon become the renown inventor and scientist, Damon Swift.

It tells the story of how she was first approached for the job, how she refused to consider it—in spite of receiving a very impressive phone call—and how she eventually decided she was getting just a little bored sitting around the house once her son was in first grade and her daughter was in kindergarten.

It also tells about her very first case, the people she worked with, and how she managed to stumble on the answer to a very deadly problem.

This book is dedicated to two groups of people. First, it is for the scientists, doctors and other health care individuals that put their very lives on the line to save others. It is also for a small group of (so far) men who recalled a better time in their lives, dragged out their old Tom Swift books and said, "Ah, heck! I can write better stuff than this!" They/We were right! We do.



Anne practically stumbled over her own feet when she walked into the lab the next day to see the shiny electron microscope that had been set up overnight. Quimby Narz had been good to his word! **Page 143**

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## FOREWORD

I had long wished to relate the stories of Tom and Sandy Swift's mother, who is also the wife of Damon Swift, the most distinguished inventor and industrialist. For almost two decades she has led a double life: devoted wife and mother; and secretly, one of the leading molecular microbiologists of her generation.

If you have read her novella-length stories you already know of her working closely with the FBI in her home town. If you have read her in depth interview then you know about some of her memories of those cases. The good ones *and* the bad ones!

But, you haven't been given Anne's back story, so to speak.

This is not a biography, by any means. There is precious little personal information about her. What it is, though, is a story of how Anne grew up from someone just entering her teen years, through her university days and into adulthood. It is about her meeting her future husband and how she had to take the initiative.

It is about their early life together as he works at NASA and later as he attempts to save the family company.

But the most important thing is that it tells the story of how Anne came to be a secret scientist for the FBI, how she first met her handler, Quimby Narz, and the story of how she was reunited with a dear friend and together they solved a deadly medical mystery.

Most of the details came from Anne herself, although Thackery Fox, the author of this story, managed to get some extra information out of the FBI that even slightly shocked Anne when she read the proof copy of this book.

Enjoy growing up with the girl who would become the woman, Anne Swift.

*Victor Appleton II*





# ANNE SWIFT:

## Molecular Biological Detective

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### CHAPTER I

#### YOU DON'T FORGET YOUR FIRST TIME

"YOU BE certain to ask questions and get the feel of your new school right off the bat," the thirty-something blonde woman was telling her skinny yet attractive, equally blonde daughter as she got ready to close the car door.

"Yes, Mother," the girl said distractedly having heard the same advice three times during the drive and at least an equal number of times in the previous two days. In fact, advice, admonitions and demands had been the main topics of discussion for at least a month around the Douglas household.

Her father had been mostly keeping to himself. He'd made it abundantly clear the previous spring that he rather his one and only child, his little Annie, not be, "Sent off packing as if we no longer had a need for her!" But, her mother was a graduate of Pembroke School of Education for Young Ladies on the western outskirts of Schenectady, New York, and as she had gone, so she intended her daughter to go.

It wasn't Amherst, Massachusetts, and that is where Anne had nearly had to be dragged into the family sports van early that morning.

On the drive, Anne contemplated jumping from the vehicle as it paused at a traffic light in Albany where they were about to stop for an early lunch. Most of the second half of the trip, between Stockbridge, Massachusetts and Albany New York, had been spent in silent contemplation regarding the possibilities behind screaming to anyone who might be within earshot that she had been kidnapped by a white slaver who was trying to smuggle her up into Canada.

She chickened out at the final moment even though a police car was handily stopped at the same light and right next to her door. He smiled and nodded to her and she gave him a sad but polite smile in return.

She loved her neighborhood and her friends and her school and even a few of the teachers she knew would have been quite hard on her back home. It was comfortable there. It was safe there.

Here, in this wilderness, in this foreign state, she knew nobody, nothing of the local customs, taboos, or even patterns of speech. Anne was certain she was to become lost and forced to wander, aimless, amongst people she would forever hold in suspicion and who would, most probably, want to steal anything she had that might remotely be considered to be, "nice."

"Did you hear what I said, Anne?" her mother's voice finally pierced her personal fog.

Turning her head as slowly as she believe she might get away with, Anne rolled her eyes and replied, "If it was your personal mantra starting with 'ask' and ending with 'off the bat,' then for what I hope will be the final time, yes. I heard that. You must have taken a shot to the head and that's the only thing you are capable of saying. Sheesh!"

Her mother's face now screwed up with emotion and Anne saw a tear course down her cheek. "No," Mrs. Douglas said, her voice very soft, "I told you that I love you."

Anne opened the car door and continued to sit back in the passenger seat.

"I love you too, Mother, but I hardly think that forcing me to come out to nowhere for a school you attended, just because Gramma and Grampa Douglas wanted to spend time in Europe and not with you, is the right thing for you to do to me."

Mrs. Douglas' look alternated between shock, anger and sadness. Finally, she managed to get out, "Is that really the way you believe your father and I feel about you?"

Thinking it over a moment because it was an honest question and Anne wanted to give it an honest answer, she eventually

said, "You? Yes. Daddy has made it clear he hates the idea. Ever since I turned twelve and started my... you know, you and I have argued and argued. So, of course I believe you want to be rid of me." She grabbed the door handle, pulled herself up, and stepped from the car.

"Some day I might be able to say I love you as well, but not today, Mother. Bye!"

Anne slammed the car door, picked up the handle of the overlarge suitcase and pulled it after herself as she walked up the long sidewalk to the front doors of the old school building. In the background she could hear her mother demanding she come back.

Everybody could hear her mother demanding she come back. At least two other girls pointed the fact out to her. Each time Anne shrugged and replied in what little German she knew, "*Zass iss nicht mein mudder!*"

She would find out that this little stunt caused her to be known as 'the little Kraut' for the first several weeks of school.

Anne laughed at that. It pointed out that, even though the war had been over for decades and decades, the caliber of girls at this school still was so narrow minded that they thought anyone remotely German ought to be called a Kraut.

She lined up behind about twenty other girls at a table with a large, handwritten sign designating it as the **A to E Girls** table. Several of the others inquired if that was for their first or last names. Anne smiled because she was covered either way.

Once assigned a room and provided with her "Welcome" packet she wandered down two of the dormitory hallways on the top floor of the building until she found room B32. It made her laugh. Her grandfather on her father's side had been a B-32 pilot during World War II. His plane, known—quite scandalously according to her mother—as *Rhonda's Rump*, had been a well decorated plane and her surviving crew had been rescued after taking heavy machine gun fire over the island of Naha, south of Japan, in the final days before the Doolittle Raid.

Anne had been told by her grandfather that the plane's original name had been "*Rhonda's Rumpus Room*" but her tail

gunner found a can of fuselage paint and made the change hours before the fateful flight.

That man along with the copilot had died after the plane had been hit by ground-based artillery. Her grandfather was the navigator and despite having taken shrapnel to both legs he managed to direct the pilot east to the island of Minamidaito where they crash landed in a field cultivated by Japanese citizens who had mostly been ignored by the war.

So, Anne sat on one of the three beds in the room uncertain whether to unpack and use one of the numbered drawers in the chest on one wall, or should she wait to see if the other two were filled with girls who were returning and might take exception to a newcomer taking their spot.

This was answered when a rather stout woman—that was what Anne had been taught to call people who are many inches too wide for their short stature—opened the door and asked why in the world she was just sitting there.

"Nobody said whether to just take a spot or if there is some sort of system," Anne explained.

"System? Oh, dear. A newbie asks if there's a system. Well, of course there is, but you can't possibly think that we'd put any of the older girls in with you pollywogs, do you? Take a bed, take the associated drawer and closet third, get unpacked and assemble in the main hall in thirty minutes. Now, jump to it!"

Anne had. She liked the bed closest to the room's only window, but decided the extra light, and cold drafts in the winter, would make it less than ideal. So took bed 2 and drawer 2, and she had her suitcase unpacked and on the top shelf of the closet—above the space marked "2"—in no time. She was just about to leave when another girl entered.

It was easy to see that the girl had been crying. She was still crying. The collar of her shirt was wet from her tears and her eyes red and rimmed.

Anne wasn't an exceptionally caring girl, not even about herself, and so she was decidedly uncomfortable with the situation. But, instead of slipping out she stood there until the girl looked at her.

"I'm Anne Douglas. My mother went here and she has dumped me off here. I have been here for less than one hour and find that I have grown to hate it. But, I see I am not alone. Hello." She held out her right hand.

The girl timidly took it and gave it a small shake.

She sniffled and replied, "I'm Leslie. Leslie Stazie. Like Stacy but with a z and an i-e."

"Hello, Leslie Leslie Stazie. Do you need any help unpacking?"

Anne looked innocently at the girl. She well knew the new person meant her name contained just one "Leslie" but it had the desired effect. The girl smiled and even laughed a little.

"No," she said with a shaking sigh. "I can do it. Mommy says I have to stand on my own two feet. Thank you, though."

Mischievously, Anne inquired, "Have you ever seen your mother standing on one of *her* own feet, much less one foot on both? Sounds uncomfortable to me."

Leslie looked at Anne as if she had just figured out her roommate was insane. When Leslie looked around at the bed and dresser situation, Anne explained it to her.

"Pick any number between one and three, as long as it is not two, and take that bed, drawer and closet space."

Leslie looked at the beds as if seeing one for the first time. Anne shook her head and left to wander the halls. She didn't know where the "main hall" was but the steady stream of girls mostly around her own age gave her a pretty good idea.

She stopped near one corner to look at a poster. It gave some facts and figures about the school. A few things stood out in her mind:

First Class	—	1927 (63 girls) Grades 10-12
Headmistress	—	Madylyn Dowrimple, RN
Deacon	—	RT. Hon. Percy Schwazh, DDv

MODERN STATISTICS

Headmistress	—	Pricilla Eddy-Hightower, PhEd
Grades Covered	—	7-12

Girls per Grade — 30

Average GPA — 3.575

Anne shrugged inwardly and left to go to the hall. She would probably drag down the grade point average. She had been a straight B student in her primary school and really didn't have a lot of gumption when it came to applying herself to schoolwork. It all seemed pretty easy, but she had been told more than once that people who had an easy time in school needed to apply themselves all that much more in order to achieve top grades.

The talk given them by the Headmistress—a woman somewhere between 40 and 55, weighing between 180 and 240 pounds who appeared to favor slightly faded gray clothing of a thickness meant to dissuade attention from men—was relatively brief and direct. It was full of exactly what Anne knew it would contain.

"Apply yourselves and you will be rewarded!"

"Keep you noses to yourself and clean!"

"Every girl here is your sister!"

"Do nothing to disgrace yourselves scholastically or personally!"

"Boys are strictly forbidden inside the school!"

"Smoking is strictly forbidden inside and outside the school!"

"Drugs are strictly forbidden at the school!"

"Alcohol is taboo and will turn you into a harlot!"

"Scandalous clothing, even in your free time, is strictly forbidden at the school and will mark you as a harlot!"

She then switched to something she evidently deemed to be onerous. It was written on her face.

"It is my sad duty to tell you that the state Board of Education has forced us to change the curriculum for you ladies. Where we had hoped to instruct you for four of your daily seven classes in the arts dealing with homemaking such as cooking, cleaning, general sewing, knitting, and child rearing, we must now limit that to only a single class period per day. Instead, and if you are disheartened by this I must refer you back to my statement of

applying yourself, but you will now have to take subjects such as mathematics, grammar and writing, historical studies, science courses of various sorts, sports-related classes, acting and oration, and—" she seemed as if the next words stuck in her throat, "—education of a personal nature regarding the act of reproduction."

That last deflated her and she had to take a seat. She soon continued from the seated position.

"Now, you girls represent our incoming group of young ladies. We are allowed, because of our charter as a private institution, to also give you classes in comportment and etiquette. These will be the first classes each morning. You will then as a group have one hour of exercise and sports followed by your choice of either a class called," and she referred to a sheet of paper clutched in her right hand, "Exploring the Scientific World for Girls or a mathematics class on remedial fractions, percentages and geometric shapes."

It went on and on, but Anne's mind froze on the science course. It sounded totally beneath any of them, but she had enjoyed a science class the previous year where they did a little chemistry, a little biology and a bit of the physical sciences.

It would turn out to be the only A she achieved that term.

At the end of almost precisely one-half hour the Headmistress wound down and dismissed the girls, telling them to explore the two buildings of the school and to introduce themselves to as many of the others as possible before dinner.

*There would be a quiz!*

Anne headed back to her room to drop off the several handouts that had been passed to each girl. Just as she turned to leave, the door opened and a strange girl came in.

"Hi. I'm Jennifer Teasdale," she announced. "I'm probably only going to be here a few days so I'm not certain it will be worth trying to become friends."

Anne was taken aback. She stared at the interloper trying to decide if any of this deserved comment. Finally she shrugged.

"Have it your way. I'm Anne Douglas and our third girl is

Leslie Stazie which she tells me is with a z. I'm in bed two and she is in three. You get the window bed." She then walked to the door, opened it and walked out.

The next morning all the lights in the room turned on at 6:30 and an announcement came from speakers in the hallways a minute later.

*"Wake up. Wake up. Wake up. The school day has begun. All girls have thirty minutes for their toilet duties before breakfast in the B dining room."*

Never an early riser Anne groaned but swung her legs out from under the covers, sat up and stretched. A few moments later she noticed her two roommates still fully covered. There was some small movement from Leslie's bed but nothing from Jennifer's.

With a sad shake of her head and a feeling that she really didn't want to be the mother of the room, Anne got up and went to gently shake the others. Leslie immediately responded by thrashing about until she was uncovered. It came as a complete shock to Anne as the girl had slept totally unclothed.

It wasn't that Anne hadn't seen other girls her age naked; gym class the previous year had meant a daily shower in a communal room outfitted with twenty shower heads and about thirty naked girls; it was that the girl was surprisingly well developed for thirteen.

Tearing her eyes away from Leslie she turned to shake Jennifer.

But, as soon as her hand touched the covers she knew there would be no waking the occupant.

Jennifer was not in her bed, just her pillow and one of the spare blankets from the closet.

Her eyes rolled and Anne said a silent prayer for the gods of justice to just make the rest of the day go more smoothly.

The showers were individual cubicles and she was glad she arrived early as a line began to form.

Breakfast was fairly standard fare but was preceded by a fifteen minute lecture by a man in a backwards collar who



introduced himself as the Reverend Patrick Spall, "of the Boston Spalls," he pointed out, smugly.

This was met with stares of complete indifference from all the girls.

As she suspected the first classes—the mandatory "act like a lady" and exercise periods—were moderately boring. She noticed with some consternation that while the girls were encouraged to "Get out there and work up a good, honest sweat!" that there was no cooling down and shower at the end. They simply were handed out small towels, told to dry their faces, and move along to the next class.

She knew from experience that later in the day there would be a goodly number of smelly girls.

Anne had, of course, selected the science class as her morning elective. Like all other instructors at the school, this one could only be termed to be stocky or even squat. *That body configuration must be a requirement for all persons teaching at the school*, she thought to herself.

Unlike most other instructors, this one was a man. Herman Newton, a man who pointed out with a little chuckle—one not echoed by any of the girls—that he was no relation to the *famous* Newton. One girl did snicker and mutter, "Must be Fig Newton then," which caused a ripple of laughter around her. Herman Newton believed it was meant in response for his little joke so he stood there beaming.

Newton spent the entire hour class pacing at the front of the classroom, pointing out all the equipment arranged on a long table at the rear of the room, more on tables to the side of the class, talking about what each piece was for, and finally telling them just about a day-by-day schedule of what they would study for the next nine weeks. Near the end of the period a smaller version of Newton arrived and was introduced as John Darling, his assistant.

It wasn't until the following day that they actually did something.

While half of the girls were sitting at the tall tables in the back learning how to prepare slide samples for the others—led by

John Darling—that second group learned the basics of working with the six microscopes in the classroom.

Anne was in the second six girls to be allowed to have a look into the eyepiece of one of them.

What she saw was an amazement to her.

There, in the single drop of pond water that had been eye-droppered onto the glass slide by Mr. Newton himself, was an entirely new world for Anne Douglas.

It was a living world unlike anything she had ever witnessed. Round things, squiggly things, and even one thing that suddenly shuddered and lurched in two directions splitting into two identical pieces that each went their merry ways.

She focussed on another part of the slide in time to watch a micro-worm thing attack and pierce into a nearly transparent blob. In seconds the worm thing began to suck the innards of the blob into itself. It was disgusting and it was beautiful.

Anne Douglas fell in love!

## CHAPTER II

### ON TO BIGGER AND BETTER THINGS

"YOU SHOULD have immediately informed either me or our dormitory manager, Miss Douglas!" the stern voice of the Headmistress scolded. "Why, one of your own sisters not in her bed? How could you ever have thought to get away with this?"

Anne was flabbergasted. She stood there, getting more and more angry at the stupidity of the woman. Finally, she snapped.

"Perhaps if you made this place anything more inviting than a prison, and had your dormitory manager take some responsibility, then Jennifer might have not slipped out. Where was the manager, anyway?" she demanded, hands on her narrow hips.

The Headmistress' nostrils flared and her eyes widened in alarm. She had never been spoken to by one of the students in this manner. She was totally at a loss for words, something Anne took advantage of.

"If your precious dorm manager wasn't off drinking herself into a stupor—" there were rampant rumors to that effect, "—then she would have been doing her patrols. All I know is that Jennifer was in her bed, in our room, at lights out. I refuse to be responsible for anything that happens after I go to sleep. You do want us to sleep, don't you?"

Miss Eddy-Hightower found herself sitting down and mopping her forehead with a handkerchief she tugged from her desk drawer.

"Please sit, Miss Douglas. It's Angela, isn't it?"

"No, it is not." Anne did not feel like assisting the woman across the desk.

"Erm, uh, well," she took a look at the report in front of her. "Oh, it's Anne. I'm sorry."

Anne Douglas could be sarcastic. She could be scathingly biting while keeping a perfectly straight face. She truly wanted

to inquire *why* the Headmistress was sorry that her name was Anne, but held her tongue.

They sat in silence until Miss Eddy-Hightower realized it was her turn to speak.

"Well, perhaps I was hasty in accusing you of a misdeed. But, you must realize my position. I am the ultimate holder of responsibility for all of you girls and ladies. With Miss Teasman —"

"It's Teasdale, Miss Headmistress," Anne interrupted and corrected her.

"Well. I'll overlook the rudeness this one time. Anyway, Miss Teasdale now being absent it falls on me to take the blame for anything that might befall her."

Anne held up her right hand.

"Umm. Yes?"

"This is probably another rude thing, but why do you talk as if this is a hundred years ago? If this so-called school is supposed to prepare us for the world out there, and I suppose for college, why can't everybody speak like it's well into the end of the twentieth century? And why do we have to be treated like a group of people who will only ever be good for getting married and making babies?"

The Headmistress blanched.

"I believe that is just about enough of that sort of talk, young lady. Why, I—" and she faltered. Twice more she started a sentence only to give up after a few syllables.

"Anne. Listen." Her voice softened and was almost pleading. "I received a phone call from your father last evening telling me that you and your mother parted ways on less than cordial terms. He told me you were going to be unhappy and that if it came to it, he would come pick you up. Do you want to remain here?"

Now it was Anne's turn to not be able to form a coherent sentence. Her mouth gaped, and from at least one angle she looked like a fish trying to breathe out of water. When she found she could talk it took everything to keep from screaming.

In fact, she was about to let loose when a knock came on the office door and one of the male instructors opened it to reveal himself holding the collar of Jennifer Teasdale.

"Got the escapee," he said with a grin.

"You may wipe that look from your face and get out of my office!" Miss Eddy-Hightower told him.

As he closed the door Anne heard him utter a very nasty word. The Headmistress chose to either not hear it, or she ignored it.

Jennifer stood there, looking miserable, until the Headmistress spoke. To Anne's surprise, it was a soft tone.

"Jennifer. Please come take the set next to Anne. And, I must tell you right off that she did not come to me over your absence. I had her brought before me because of it. She has been, well, defending you to me, so I want you to have no ill feeling toward her."

She glanced at Anne and gave her a slight wink with the eye farthest from Jennifer.

Within a week all had been mostly forgotten.

Anne practically sleepwalked through her early classes and only perked up when the science class started. She was, to her surprise, made the class student instructor and helped the other two men with a number of things.

She had easily earned their trust and admiration when, on the third day of the class, each girl had been provided a sterile lancet—a sharp miniature blade to poke into a finger so that a drop of blood might be obtained—and a clean slide and slide cover.

Without any thought other than she was about to see her own living blood under the microscope, Anne poked her middle fingertip, squeezed the single droplet of blood onto the slide glass, and had it under the two hold-down arms in seconds. She looked up only to see that most of the girls had not even opened their lancet packs, and several had turned pale. One girl was sobbing in the back corner of the room.

Abandoning her own slide, Anne started going from girl to

girl, poking their fingers and helping them prepare their own slides. The crying girl had to be coaxed by the instructors before she would offer her hand to Anne. And, once poked, she smiled because it had not hurt as much as she had believed it might, looked down at the droplet of blood on her finger, and promptly threw up all over Mr. Darling and a little on Anne's left shoe.

Anne was surprised at her reaction. In the past, she would have probably found herself coming close to joining the girl. Today, she tapped her shoe on the side to knock most of the unwanted materials off, finished the girl's slide for her and returned to her microscope.

From that point on she was considered by her classmates to be the go-to girl if they needed help.

By the winter break Anne was also making a name for herself in two other ways; one she liked and the other frustrated her.

She liked the fact that she excelled in touch football. It was the first year anything more violent than badminton was offered to the girls and most of the staff feared injuries would ruin many a girl's chances at their academics. Some of the girls were hesitant to take part.

Not so Anne. She found a talent for taking a handoff and running to beat all around the ends. She became the scoring star of the team.

What she really wished would resolve itself was the nickname some of the older girls gave her. "The Board" was nothing short of a slam at the fact Anne was a late bloomer. In fact, her hips may have begun to widen and her waist come in, but her breasts steadfastly refused to come out to play.

Her mother had told her the year before when most of her friends were starting to develop in the chest area, "It will come, Annie. Not all girls start at the same time. Just wait and be patient."

Now, all Anne could think whenever she was naked and a mirror was nearby was, "Why not now?"

Her father arrived the evening before the girls were to be released for the three week holiday interval. Anne wanted to ask

where her mother was but thought better of it. And, while he seemed intent on smiling and telling her how much *he* missed her, she noticed he never said, "We have missed you." It made her sad to think her final words to her mother had driven a wedge between them to such a degree. She wondered whether she was actually going to be welcome back home.

And so, as they pulled away from the parking lot that next morning, she turned to him and bluntly asked, "Why isn't mother here?"

He said nothing until they pulled onto the freeway heading south to Interstate 90.

"Your mother is dealing with a problem," he started the explanation. When he sensed her dismay he hastened to add, "Actually, it is a dilemma. It has nothing to do with you or the little argument you had back in September. It has to do with a decision she has had to make and live with. One that, while it does regard you, also has much to do with her family going back several generations. And, she thinks that you must hate her."

"She never said anything about past generations," Anne told him, now confused.

"Well, her grandfather was a very wealthy man. So much so that he paid several very powerful lawyers a lot of money to find ways to exert his influence over his family even long after he died."

He told her the basic story of Matthew Bartle, a railroad magnate from the nineteenth century. Matthew had made millions in business and had not only set aside vast sums for his heirs, he also set up several endowments.

One of them, her father told her, had been the seed funding for the Pembroke School of Education for Young Ladies.

"He wanted his own daughters to ensure their daughters would be guaranteed a premium education and so he had the endowment setup so that as they reached the age of ten, the school was constructed. By the time his older one turned twelve it was ready for her. He never lived to see that happen, and I'm certain he meant well, but his act has paralyzed the feminine side of the family for generations."

"I don't understand," she told him. It was the truth.

"Okay, then I will tell you that his two daughters and two granddaughters attended your school as did the three girls they and their brother had between them."

"But, I still don't see why. It's such an old fashioned stuck-in-the-past place. Why did they have to go?"

"For the simple reason that if they did not, they and their families and descendants would be forever cut out of the family fortunes. Which, by the way, is why your own mother attended the school. Only so that she could claim part of the millions and millions of dollars still out there once she turned thirty. The boys get theirs at the age of twenty-one. Tens and tens of millions of dollars sit in the endowment fund. And so, I am afraid she prevailed in her demand that you, too, go to that school. So you will be able to claim your rightful share when the time comes. I know that is a long way off, nearly sixteen years, but you will regret it if you do not do what is necessary to collect it."

Anne's head was swimming; she felt faint and she felt sick. "Stop the car. Now!" she demanded.

He pushed down on the brake pedal and got the car mostly to a halt before she opened the window and vomited. A minute later she finished, her breakfast now a splat and a memory, and sat back. "I'll wash that off the car when we get home," she told him.

They drove on for an hour before talking more about the Bartle fortunes.

It all turned out to be along the lines of: daughters were to be educated at the school. Period. If they did not attend—other than out of what Matthew had termed, "A deficiency of the mind," that her father said probably meant a brain birth defect—then they were out of the will as of the date the girl turned fifteen.

If the children were all male, then a fund sufficient to pay for college was provided.

But, no such funding for a college education for the women



was in the will.

"Your mother's stomach practically ate itself with the acid churning over her decision."

As they pulled into the driveway of their home, she tapped him on the forearm.

"Why?"

"Why what, honey?"

"Why didn't she just tell me?"

He paused before answering. "I don't know because she could never tell me, and that is one of the reasons she and I have been living apart for the past two months."

*Apart?* Anne felt her world dissolve under her. Everything went black—

She awoke in her old room, her worried mother and father sitting on the edge of the bed, holding hands, looking horribly worried.

The first several days of her vacation were tense and she was about to suggest they just send her back, that she would be a "good girl" and shut up and take it for the good of the family. But then, as Christmas Eve approached and the family tree went up and was decorated by the three of them, she detected a change in her parents. They stayed by each other's side a lot, touching hands and even sneaking a kiss behind the tree when they thought she might not be watching.

Anne kept quiet through the rest of the break and only spoke up their final dinner together.

"So, daddy told me about the Bartle family stuff, and I guess I can live with it, but you two have just got to stay together."

While they both tried to keep solemn faces, her mother's broke first. With a smile she told Anne, "We are. Your father had me move back in on Christmas Eve in case you didn't notice it. I guess you just thought I came over early and left late, huh? I am so sorry I couldn't tell you about the reason for sending you to the school. It all sounds so... so... horrible of me to do it for the

money. But it isn't for your father and me. We have my inheritance. It is to set you up for receiving yours later in life."

"Just so you know, and not to make you feel guilty, I plan on telling any daughters I have up front about the will thing," Anne told her.

The rest of the meal had been eaten in silence.

Anne arrived back at school with a renewed attitude. She wasn't quite certain why, but on the third day back she was called into the Headmistress' office.

To her surprise, there was a new woman in the chair behind the desk. She stood as Anne entered and offered her hand.

"Hello, Anne. My name is Annalise Hayden and I am, I suppose you might figure out, the new Principal. It turns out that Miss Eddy-Hightower was unable to come to grips with several changes that the Board of Directors want instituted immediately. Starting with the change in the title. The old one was so, well, old. She didn't want to change to being called a Principal. And, then there is the matter of the curriculum. But, I see you have a question in there, somewhere."

"May I be allowed to speak my mind, or do I need to follow the old, traditional ways?"

"This is a very informal meeting, Anne. I will be addressing all of the girls this afternoon, but I especially wanted to speak with you. You see, and I have been informed that you know of your family's generosity to this school, I hope you will accept the first, ever, student advisor position here at the school."

Anne had so wanted to correct her that it ought to be "all *the* girls" instead of "all *of* the girls," but had held her tongue. She was beginning to like this new woman.

She told Anne the responsibilities including helping to select the classes that would soon be offered, what extracurricular activities the girls might enjoy—which was explained as including dances, picnics and even mingling with the male students from the boy's school on the other side of a rather imposing wall to the school's south.

Anne knew about the boys. She had once taken apart a

microscope that had been dropped by another girl and used two of the lenses, held just so, to make a rudimentary telescope. She immediately had gone to the window and used it to bring several of the older teen boys into focus, albeit upside down.

It had sent her heart racing.

The sight of the boys exercising shirtless had been something Anne Douglas liked very much.

She gladly accepted the new position. The new Principal was a very nice woman who told her that—only in the office and only when there were no others there—Anne could call her Annalise.

"We Annes have to stick together, don't we?" she asked with a smile.

The remainder of the school year zoomed by and as summer break approached, Anne found that she was of two minds. On one hand she wanted to go home, sleep in her own bed, sleep *in*, and see old friends, but she also was going to miss school. Especially the two science classes she was now taking.

But, summer came and she skipped down the long walk to the waiting car with her mother and father and didn't stop chattering about everything that had happened all the way back to their house.

Her first month home she spent getting reacquainted with her friends. It was fun and she loved every minute of it.

She also celebrated her fourteenth birthday on June 21st, the official first day of summer. She felt especially happy and excited when she unwrapped one box that turned out to be a small makeup case filled with the things her parents had always told her she could have once she turned fourteen.

Fingernail polish, lip gloss, tweezers to shape her eyebrows, and even some subdued eye liner and mascara.

Her mother took her to the big bathroom off her parent's bedroom, put her on a stool, and showed her how to apply just a minimal amount.

"Not so much that all people see is the makeup, darling," she patiently explained. "You want to enhance but never cover. This stuff isn't called camouflage for a *very good reason!*"

But, on the morning of July 2, she awoke to an even more wonderful surprise, one that put a smile on her face which did not disappear for a week.

Anne woke up, walked into her bathroom, turned on the shower to heat it up, and pulled her pajama top off over her head. As she bent over to drop her bottoms to the floor she realized that the top had rubbed a little roughly against her body on the way off. She straightened and stared at the mirror.

And then she smiled.

And, she touched and pushed a little and turned to one side and the other and looked and looked and looked.

Anne Douglas had begun to get breasts!

## CHAPTER III

### THE GREATEST DISCOVERY OF ALL

ANNE'S attention was torn in two directions during her eighth grade year.

With the departure of a couple of the old stodgy school instructors and hiring of fresh faces and the addition of classes that had real meaning for girls as well as boys, she was loving school. She even asked if it might be possible to have one additional class period added to the school day so she could take more classes.

With that not being an option, she settled for challenging at least one of the "core" classes she felt she already knew. She succeeded, but soon felt the tug of her other new love.

Boys!

Just as soon as her hormones figured out what to do with her body, Anne Douglas began keeping one eye on the top of the microscope and the other roaming around looking at any young male.

And, those hormones decided to make up for lost time where it came to her development, so she soon found herself to be the object of desire in the eyes of the several boys who spent their afternoons earning extra credit by doing gardening and lawn work at the school.

Even the older girls who had nicknamed her "The Board," had to admit it no longer applied.

On top of everything else, Anne grew three inches taller that year, her face got ever so slightly longer and the result was that she turned from quite cute to devastatingly beautiful.

By the time the next school year came around, she had already dated seven boys back in Amherst, and she discovered that she really, really, really liked kissing. She could spend an hour just kissing one boy, her favorite being a freckled redhead named Larry.

Now, however, it was time to start what would traditionally be called her freshman year. And, freshmen no longer had to take classes like Basic Parts of Speech or History of the Civil War as in the previous years. This left her at least one more period to fill with subjects she liked. Of course, these were generally science-related, but she surprised herself when she signed up for a class in Cooking Sciences for the winter term.

She was pleasantly pleased to discover that it wasn't just a cooking class. The textbook was a cookbook by a famous television chef, but he also heavily concentrated on the whys of cooking—why did things turn brown; why did certain combinations become more than the sum of the individual parts; and more—more than just the act of mixing and heating.

To celebrate the end of the term the twenty-two girls in the class put on a dinner party for twenty-nine of the junior boys from the nearby school. These boys had excelled in a course dealing with Basic Cooking, Cleaning and Sewing for the Young Bachelor. The flip of coin had decided who would cook for the other class.

At the end of the successful meal, the boys lined up on one side of the aisle between tables and the girls on the other. Most of the boys shook the hands of their counterparts, but a few took advantage of leaning in and giving their hosts small kisses.

Two girls had to be helped into chairs as these were their first ever kisses and the emotions had overcome them. Anne smiled a lot and tried to promote longer-than-a-peck kisses from at least five of the better looking boys.

There was, of course, some tutting and clearing of adult throats to try to hurry things up, but for the most part the three teachers chaperoning the event turned a slightly blind eye to any lip-to-lip contact.

In her room—still rooming with Leslie but no longer with Jennifer, who had left for a public school in Idaho when her father had been transferred there—Anne clutched her pillow to her chest, eyes closed, and savored the memories.

By the following morning she was still grinning as she ate breakfast.

"Boy, you sure were happy about something last night," Barbie—the new third roommate and a girl who it might most nicely be said had, "A heart full of love and a head full of sawdust"—said as the girls sipped their milky tea.

Anne looked at Barbie and felt pity for the girl. She was pleasant enough and not unattractive, but her eyes were too far spaced and sort of gray rather than blue, slightly crossed, and she tried ever so hard to keep up with things, but it was a wonder how she passed any of her classes.

"We had that dinner last night," she explained for the second time to the girl. "Remember? And, as I said right before we left the room, I got to kiss a couple of the boys who came over to say thank you. That's why I am so happy, Barbie. Just that."

For her sophomore and junior years Anne tried to concentrate on her schooling, but putting boys out of her mind was difficult.

It was made even more impossible when, as the senior year began, it was announced that the two schools would hold several dances during the year.

"We want you all to have a more rounded social experience before you leave," it was explained. "Part of that is recognizing that as young women you will most likely go on to colleges and universities that are mixed gender. It would do you a disservice to not prepare you for how to interact with young men on a purely friendly level."

For the first dance, held on Halloween, Anne spent the first fifteen minutes sitting with most of the other girls while the boys stood across the basketball court at their school—now decorated with streamers and balloons and pumpkins—before she'd had enough. With a downward push to the chair she stood, and walked purposely over to a trio of boys who were staring at this sudden appearance of a beautiful girl coming at them as if they were deer frozen in headlights.

Standing in front of them she folded her arms under her breasts. She knew the effect this move had on boys and had practiced it during the summer to hilarious results. This included causing one young man to walk into a light pole on a

downtown street of Amhurst.

"I will make the three of you a deal," she told them as they stared unabashedly at her chest, "if you promise to look up into my eyes, at least when I'm actually talking at you for gosh sakes, then I will slow dance with each of you at least once. Real close, if you get my meaning. It's all I can promise, but I don't feel like trying to remove the paws of a lot of these other jokers from my backside. So," and she smiled to herself seeing them all looking at her face, "who wants to be first?"

She had enjoyed dancing with them and was glad that the teacher working the turntable played at least three slow tunes so she could pay her debt.

At the end of the night, the three boys had taken on a new look; they seemed considerably more confident and relaxed around her.

Anne felt tired, in a wonderful way, and a little sweaty, but she was happy. She enjoyed dancing and none of the three had tried anything other than a little slip down to touch her hips.

At evening's end she gave them each a short, chaste kiss on the lips leaving them slightly dazed.

The Winter's Eve Dance was held at her school. Her three young gentlemen friends were waiting for her with expectant looks on their faces. She could not disappoint then, so her "dance card" was immediately filled for the entire night.

This time the goodnight kisses lasted more than just one second.

The Spring Fling held, for some reason, on Valentine's Day—and why not just call it a Valentine's Day dance?—had been equally as much fun. All three of her dance partners were there and took no time in coming over to ask if she was still willing to dance with them again.

"Of course!" she told them taking the tallest one by the hand and heading to the floor.

That night Leslie admitted she had allowed one of the boys to touch her left breast. "He was so nice and wanted to do it so much I couldn't say no," she said. "Besides, it felt kind of nice!"



Barbie would only tell them that one of her dance partners had pinched her bottom so hard she knew she would have a bruise the next day.

Anne savored the close body to body contact with her trio of male admirers.

The final dance of the year, an outside affair, had been called off early when it was discovered that several couples had snuck off for purposes best left for their knowledge only.

Anne kissed her trio of dance partners on the lips, this time lingering about five seconds, and told them she truly hoped they had wonderful lives and how thankful she was they had been gentlemen.

"If you keep that up, you will make three young women very happy they chose you," she said meaning every word.

As she was taking her dress off a little later she hugged herself and thought, "*I hope I meet some guy as nice as they were.*"

With just two weeks until final examinations and then graduation, Anne applied herself to a little side project she had been trying to finish for nearly the whole final semester. After announcing he would be retiring after the current year, John Darling, her favorite science teacher, had approached her with a proposition.

"Anne. You must know you are absolutely far and away the best science student I've ever had, either here at the girls' school or when I used to teach in Albany at Albany High." He looked at her to see if she would agree.

"I guess. I mean, I've always found the things you teach us fascinating and, umm, maybe I shouldn't admit this, but kind of easy." Now, she looked at him to see his reaction.

He laughed. "I've been teaching the dickens out myself, Anne. While most of the girls keep complaining about how hard 'mean old Mr. Darling' is being, I think I have struggled keeping up with you."

He looked earnest, and Anne blushed at the compliments.

"Okay. So here is what I would like to propose. I have a small

grant from the National Science Foundation to look into reports that a mostly detested and invasive plant down south might have intriguing properties when used in patients with certain types of cancer."

Anne was shocked.

"Bu— but that sounds like *real research!*" she told him.

John Darling laughed again. He also felt a slight pang of desire for this beautiful young woman, but held that in check.

"That is pretty much exactly what it is," he told her. "I will be receiving a small, mobile lab, otherwise known as a trailer, day after tomorrow. It comes complete with a small safety chamber so we will never be exposed to any of the target cells, some lab mice, a slew of chemicals and medications plus an ongoing supply of this *Ampelopsis brevipedunculata* or porcelain berry."

It had started out in early fall as one of the most fascinating things Anne had been involved in. It still was, but for unknown reasons the project had been placed on a month-long hold back in March. Now, with exactly fifteen days left before she would be leaving, they were more than sixteen days away from completing the study.

A type of wild grape, porcelain berry had been used by native Americans for centuries as a curative. But, domestic science had yet to succeed in using it to combat either the skin cancer or the thyroid cancer that it was claimed to control.

She and John had worked many evenings lately and had started their final testing on the last dozen of the infected mice three days before.

She was standing at the microscope—an incredibly more powerful model compared to the ones in the school's lab—looking at a blood sample taken from one of the thyroids.

"Anything?" John's voice made her jump. He had come into the trailer quietly to not disturb her concentration.

She turned and smiled. "Maybe."

His incredulous look at her, seeking for verification she might be telling him there was actually some reasonable proof, told her everything. This man was a true researcher, but one who had

come to the end. At what he admitted to her was his sixty-second year of life, John had very little to show for his years of dedicated research.

She so wanted him to have that.

"Yep!" she said. "It looks like exactly what you suspected. It isn't just the berries or their juice. It's that, plus the skins and that strange fungus we had been cleaning off. Whirl that all up, including some of the short stems, let it ferment like we did, heat to get rid of most of the resulting alcohol, and strain everything solid out before injecting it into the thyroid."

She moved to the side to let him look into the eyepiece. When he stood back up there were tears in his eyes. He hugged her, holding onto Anne perhaps longer than was appropriate, but she understood his reasons. He was just so incredibly happy to see a result from their work.

"Do you know what this means?" he asked.

"Uhh, that there might be some cure or at least control for this sort of cancer?"

"Anne," he said and stepped back, taking her shoulders in his hands, "if this holds and continues to work, it may mean that people suffering from stage 1 Papillary and Follicular thyroid cancer can see it contained and shrunk to the point where removing the tumor could be as innocuous as removing the tonsils."

She congratulated him.

"It wasn't just me, Anne. My god! I had you as both my assistant, but more important, my second eyes, brain and hands. I only thought about inclusion of the fungus because of a conversation you and I had a month ago. Surely you must recall asking that question? 'Do you think the Indians would have washed the berries or just eaten them off the vines, Mr. Darling?' That was the turning point. You should be so proud of that. Let me tell you something personally exciting. For you. Well, for me, too, but I want you to know that if the final results are positive, I want this to hereafter be known as the Darling-Douglas Thyroidal Flush."

Anne didn't know how to react to the news. She really didn't understand the importance of having her name on what would one day become the *de rigueur* treatment for thyroid cancer. It would become a legacy that opened doors to her that might otherwise have remained forever shut.

"Gosh," was all she could think to say.

John laughed and hugged her again. "Gosh isn't the half of it, Anne. Thanking you isn't half of what you deserve. You will have changed many lives out there, saved many, but mostly you have changed mine. I might even get another research grant out of this and keep myself from sitting around as just another aimless retired guy!"

By the day before graduation, John had triple checked the results and was a most happy man. He attended the ceremonies and had requested five minutes to address the class. During his speech he told the other girls, "One of you has excelled. One of you has, perhaps, advanced medicine by dozens of years. It is the sort of success story that I and the other people running and teaching at this institution hope for but rarely achieve. I firmly believe that, at some point in your lives, each of you will have your own success story. One you can proudly hold your head high when talking about or even just thinking about.

"Be it winning a Nobel Prize, becoming a parent to the next Nobel Prize winner, writing a novel that changes someone's life for the better—or that saves someone's life—fighting against a foreign enemy, or whatever, you all have the potential to do incredible things. Just as Anne Douglas has. I would now like to ask Anne to come here to the dais. Anne?"

Looking around to see if there was anyone who could tell her what to do, Anne rose stiffly and walked to the stage. Climbing the three stairs she took the offered hand of John Darling and allowed him to lead her to the podium.

"It is with the greatest of pleasure, Anne Douglas, I award you with this certificate of achievement from the American Academy of Science. It is awarded only a few times per year and says, in part, that you have made a notable advance in the science of medicine."

Anne was so shocked by the award that she forgot she had wanted to cry over the huge part of her life was now concluding.

He leaned over to her as her schoolmates stood to give her a mostly thunderous round of applause and gave her a little kiss on the cheek.

In her ear he whispered, "Our Principal, several of the senior teachers and I would like to have you join us for a small party after the ceremonies end. Can you come?"

She nodded.

There were seven people in the room from the school, along with a man whom Anne had never seen, in attendance. He stood to the side and away from the rest of them as everyone crowded around Anne shaking her hand, hugging her and generally letting her know she was a special part of the school and would be missed.

Finally, John Darling motioned for the man to join them.

"Anne. This gentleman is Bradly Arnold. Mr. Arnold is the advance placement Dean at MIT. He and I go way back, and I have been playing you up to him over this past two years. He is someone you definitely need to know."

Anne politely shook his hand. Hers was icy cold from the nervousness she felt, but he didn't seem to notice.

"It is a pleasure, Miss Douglas, to finally meet you. John, erm, I mean Mr. Darling here—"

"For crying out loud, Brad. She has every right to call me John. She is no longer a student—she is a colleague!"

Bradly smiled at Ann. "Of course. So, *John* has been telling me of your enthusiasm for science in general, and about your rather advanced understanding of biology and medicine. At MIT we have little to offer you today, but we do have a sister campus, part of our own but managed as a separate school, where I think you would fit right in."

He began to describe the new school of Microbiology and of the offerings it might provide. The more he spoke the more she realized that the place he talked about was exactly what she would be spending her entire summer trying to get into.

"So, what are your thoughts? Interested?" he asked her.

"Well, I'm thinking that it sounds like heaven to me, but I don't know if my parents can swing that sort of tuition. As much as I want to come, I'm not sure we can afford it." She looked very sad.

"Ahhh, I don't believe you understand me, Anne. I'm not just suggesting that you attend our school, I'm telling you that we will be offering you a full ride. Total scholarship. You pay nothing."

Now she was confused. "But, isn't that just for low income families and athletes? I mean, my folks do have money..."

He laughed. "No, Anne. It is also for people like you. People who will excel in life and will make us very, very proud."

What he did not say was, *And you are just the person I've been told we need to find. Your country needs you!*

## CHAPTER IV

### SORORITY LIFE; AT MIT?

SUMMER was a whirlwind even though Anne had practically nothing to do. Other kids her age were madly dashing around trying to get into their second or third choices of schools. Many were retaking the College Entrance Placement test in the hope of bettering the scores they had received about a year earlier.

She didn't have to do any of that. Certainly she had scored very high on the test and could have applied to almost any school, but Anne had decided between her junior and senior years to take a year off.

A lot of kids called this a "gap year," or a "travel year," or even a "I've got to find myself year." For her, it was planned to be more of a "My brain is so tired that I need to recover for a... at least a year."

However, now that she was going to be attending a part of MIT, she had to pull herself together and get mentally prepared to hit not just the standard books, but to hit the books associated with a concentrated study in Biology. One that was so concentrated that the entire core course load—those annoying classes designed to check to see if you were paying attention in high school—would be behind her after just two semesters. From that point on, she could and would spend most of her course time directly in her field.

This summer was special to Anne for several reasons, only one of which she shared with her mother and father.

The first one was she finally took the time to practice a little and to get her drivers license.

The two other things she most certainly *did not* wish to share with them were of a more coming-of-age nature. One included consuming far too many beers while at a party with a number of her old friends.

This led to her very first experience with having the foamy liquid come racing back up and squirting out of her nose. And, *that* happened because she was far too successful in slapping

her hands over her mouth to keep things from exiting that way. It led to her laughing hysterically at both what had happened as well as the looks on the faces of the five or six other teens that had witnessed it.

It taught her two lessons: drink not only less but more slowly; and, she had a very high tolerance to alcohol. The incident hadn't made her feel drunk.

After the intake of about nine beers and the expelling of probably six of those, she felt very little of the effects of the alcohol the other kids seemed to be undergoing. Where they generally became boisterous or, in one case, what she would later learn was a "mean drunk," she sat watching their reactions wishing she had a notebook and pencil to take down a few notes.

When she arrived home smelling of beer she explained that another kid had brought some bottles and one of them had been splashed on her. Because she was showing no effects, her parents believed her.

Three weeks later she experienced something that included only her and the boy she had mostly been dating that summer.

She knew between the two, the beer incident would be the likely candidate for something to tell her folks about if they really pushed her.

Not this other one!

She did admit it to her mother a week later and was so profound in her promise that it had been a wonderful, but one-time-only thing that her mother didn't even give her a *tut!*

Of course, as it came time to pack up for school Anne wondered if she should find a way to admit it had hardly been a one-time thing; it had been an eight-time-thing, and one she was extremely happy about. She decided to let it be her little secret.

He summer ended on the 29th of August, so surrounded by all her clothing, bedding, and other things a college student must have, she drove her little Volkswagen Type 4 mini station wagon from the family home in Amherst, and headed east to Boston.

Before checking into the Freshman Dorm she took a drive around the greater MIT campus. She had a chuckle on



discovering there was an Amherst Street on campus. But, her school and living quarters were on the other side of Main and Broadway streets. Fronting on Broad Canal—which was neither—it had until recently been an industrial area.

Now, the three buildings of the school and the two dormitory buildings stood gleaming in the summer sunlight.

Her mother had been a member of a sorority when she attended college and suggested Anne look into that. It would, she assured her daughter, give her more opportunities to socialize.

However, first things first. She found a parking spot, grabbed her purse and computer bag and headed into a building to her left with a door marked ADMISSIONS.

Inside were several hallways and half a dozen cubicles.

An attractive girl, probably a few years older than Anne, stood up from the closest cube and looked over the partition.

"Hello. Are you one of the new kids?" she asked with a big smile.

"Yes. I'm Anne Douglas. Biology. I hope I'm in the right place."

The other girl nodded. "I'm Darla Priddy. I'm supposed to help get you to your assigned room, see if you need anyone to help unpack your stuff, get you a car permit, and about fifty other things during the next three days. Uhhh," she said biting her lower lip as she looked at a list on her desk, "you really weren't supposed to get here until tomorrow, you know?"

"Oh, my. No, I didn't. I thought it was the twenty-ninth for incoming Freshmen.

"Yeah, but you're what's called a Freshman Plus. It's kinda like royalty around here. You must have done something really special to rate that." She looked encouragingly at Anne.

Anne shrugged and then remembered the award. "Oh, I guess it's because of the AAS award. I sort of helped discover a cancer cure."

Darla's eyes went wide as saucers. Her smile came back now even wider. "Oh my god! That's right. Anne Douglas, I should have remembered all the news coverage when it was announced

you'd be coming here. Listen, I'm a Bio student but nothing like you."

They chatted for half an hour until another student worker came to take over, and Darla led Anne to the adjoining building and her new dorm room.

It was everything she expected in a freshman's dorm. It was stark with nothing on the walls other than a check-off list detailing what students could and could not have in their rooms. The floor was of some hard-wearing covering that had been inexpertly installed with gaps around most of the walls. The bed was standard issue with a serviceable mattress over box springs and appeared to be tilted toward the floor in the front.

Before she did anything, Anne hauled the box springs around so any tilt they imparted into the mattress would ease her toward the wall rather than out of bed onto the hard surface below. With a sigh she made her bed and arranged her two favorite pillows at the head.

An hour later, now unpacked and bored, she wandered back to the office. Darla was, the other young woman informed her, now gone for the day, but had left Anne a note.

She read it.

Anne,

*I was wondering if you wanted me to take you around and show you the whats and wheres of our campus. With barely anyone here today it is a perfect time. Plus, I can show you the five absolutely must go to spots for food.*

*My phone number is at the bottom. I will be there until about 5:00.*

*I hope you call.*

Darla

Anne smiled, thanked the other woman and left. All the curly bits were the kind of thing she expected Darla might add to her

writing. She knew they would become great friends.

Outside she pulled out her cell phone and made the call. Darla sounded very excited and agreed to come over to pick Anne up in five minutes. While she waited, Anne wandered around the buildings. Looking more like older office buildings than part of a major university, she marveled at the thought that inside at least one of them was equipment the likes of which she had only dreamt about.

The campus tour took them across the main street and into the MIT grounds. While technically part of MIT, Anne's new school was officially known as Lister University, so named for Joseph Lister most famous for his use of antiseptics on wounds.

Darla explained that the regular MIT students called it Gargle U. The less kind called in Gargoyles U or just Goo.

As they walked and talked about what she might expect, Anne was surprised to find out that the school—both parts—had a very active Greek community. Fraternities and Sororities were nothing new to Anne, at least in concept. To hear that more than fifty percent of all students were actively involved was a surprise.

"Of course, you can't pledge until you're a sophomore, but keep mine in mind, if you will. It's Gamma Rho Lambda. We're the girls from GRL," she said pronouncing the letters as if they were a word.

Anne's first two semesters were just as expected with the core classes getting taken care of. She aced the classes.

But it was on a spring day, some time on a Monday morning between 10:00 a.m. and noon when Anne Swift began to fall in love with an older man.

Having taken a seat in the middle of the second row in the small theater she was jotting a note in the corner of a piece of note paper when the side door opened and a man—definitely older than her parents but by no means ancient—stepped into the room, took an appraising look at the thirty or so students and then walked to the podium.

"Good morning, gentlepersons. I am Doctor Wiley Oswaldt.

That's as in PhD, not, 'Say Doc, it hurts when I do this.' Outside of this room I am always Doctor Oswaldt. Inside, I am either Professor or Wiley. If you are not certain you can keep those straight, then I will forever be Doctor."

With those words, accompanied by the twinkle in the man's eyes that only Anne must have caught, she started to fall.

The class, Elementary Biology in Law Enforcement, was something the Doctor admitted was a stretch for him. "I am a blood and guts guy. Give me a pipette with a single droplet of blood, or a gut sample—and for those of you who aren't sure what that means, it is a smear of intestinal goop, hopefully from the upper end of that tract—and I'm a happy Wiley."

Anne absolutely loved Wiley Oswaldt's straightforward approach to teaching and his evident love of his chosen field. He was a natural instructor and held everybody's attention with the exception of one boy who was only at the school to please his father. He would be gone within the next few weeks having decided that the Air Force was more what he wanted from life.

But for Anne, this was her vision of what her personal heaven might be. It included incredible lectures by a man who used humor to make everything seem alive, plenty of practical hands-on time with some of the equipment the typical crime scene investigative laboratory might be outfitted with, plus a bonus.

Wiley Oswaldt turned out to be her Advisor.

This meant, at its most basic level, she had one full private hour with him every other week.

Except for the times when he was mysteriously not there.

This occurred only once her first year at school, and just after the middle of May. She arrived at his office on Monday for her afternoon meeting only to find a woman sitting at his desk.

"I'm Anne Douglas," she said. "Where is Doctor Oswaldt?"

"Ah, Anne. Please come in. My name is Faith Tamburello. The good Doctor has been called way for a week or so and I am his semi-official fill-in. Of course, I realize I am a poor substitute for him, but if you have any troubles I might help with...?"

Anne shook her head. She had recently been spending her

time with Doctor Oswaldt discussing advanced research opportunities the school was soon going to be starting. As a Freshman she was not officially allowed to request a position much less participate, but as an Advanced Placement student—based on her experience and the National award—she could sit in on any session and even partake of the discussions, but not any of the hands on work.

"Thank you, uh, is it Miss or Missus?"

"It is, sadly after eleven years, back to Miss. But you may call me Faith. I try not to stand on ceremony when filling in."

"Okay. Thank you, Faith, but I don't have anything going on that isn't close to excellent right now. It's just that Doctor Oswaldt and I have been having a pretty deep conversation about an upcoming research project. So, thanks but I guess I won't take up any of your time today." She turned to leave but turned back. "Um, if there is anything that comes to mind and you're still here in two weeks, then I'll come prepared."

Doctor Oswaldt was back nine days later and he called her.

"Annie, I wanted to let you know two things. First, I'm back from my... uhh, my little leave of absence. Secondly, I wanted to let you know about a little research project I would like to have your help with. That is, if you can spare a couple afternoons and evenings this next week?"

"Absolutely!"

It was Wednesday and they agreed to meet on Friday afternoon in his office. She had trouble sleeping Thursday night and was happy that Fridays were her easy day with just two classes, both in the morning.

At one in the afternoon, the agreed on time, she breezed into his office. But, she stopped short on seeing a man sitting in one of the two chairs on the other side of the desk.

"Sorry," she said as she attempted to back from the room.

"No, Annie. Please come in. I believe you know my other visitor?"

Anne looked. "Oh, gosh! You're, ummm, Mr. Arnold. Oh, I'm sorry but I've forgotten your first name. But I remember you

very well. We met at Pembroke at the graduation party and you told me how I was able to come here. My parents keep asking if I can get your address to write a thank you letter."

"That's right, Miss Douglas." He stood up and shook her hand. "It is Bradly, or Brad. I suppose for formality sake it ought to be Mr. Arnold around here. Have a seat, please."

She sat in the offered chair.

"Wiley, or rather Doctor Oswaldt and I were just talking about a research project that he and I would like to have you involved in. It is something of a surprise to us as it was only announced officially today. The U.S. Government wants at least twenty different research teams or individuals to work on identifying and coming up with an antibody they believe a species of sloth contains that keep them from having any issues with personal livestock. As in, fleas, ticks, mites and the likes."

He went on to say that the team or person who was able to fully identify the antibody and hopefully discover a way to either grow it in laboratory conditions or synthesize it for use in the American livestock industry would receive both a cash prize for themselves as well as a sizable endowment for their school.

"It must be, for obvious and not-so-obvious reasons, a very secret project, Anne. No discussions with friends. No mentioning anything about it outside of the lab we will provide you with. You will report any and all findings to Wil—the Doctor, here, and to him alone. Can you work under those conditions?"

Anne's face was scrunched up in a scowl. She relaxed her features and nodded. "Yes. When can I start?"

"That's the spirit, Annie!" Wiley Oswaldt said to her.

She smiled at him. For some reason, even though she had generally disliked being called Annie by others, she felt a warmth in his calling her that and liked it.

After the Admissions man excused himself and left, Anne and Doctor Oswaldt headed down the hall and took the stairs to the basement of the building. There, after opening a door with four locks on it—one a cypher lock with a six-digit code she would

need to remember—Anne nearly had her knees buckle under her.

The room was a fully outfitted lab, about twenty feet square, and featured an array of absolutely new equipment from centrifuge to incubator to a trio of microscopes and a somewhat futuristic-looking computer. Cold and frozen storage units sat side-by-side on one side of the room, and a separate chamber—obviously an isolation room—was accessible via three sets of sealed arm and glove setups.

"It's like out of that old movie, *The Andromeda Strain*, isn't it?" he asked her.

"It's... it's beautiful!" she whispered, enthused.

The rest of their afternoon was spent in examining each piece in the room. Only two of them were new to Anne, and Wiley Oswaldt was very well versed in them. In moments she was as well.

When the 50 ml of sloth blood plus another 50 ml of their plasma arrived on Monday, along with the official declaration to start the research project no earlier than 3:00 p.m. that afternoon, Anne was thrilled. She had received permission to skip her classes that week so she might spend the maximum amount of time in the lab.

That first day was spent performing microscopic examinations of minute amounts of the blood and plasma. She did voluminous research on the computer regarding the blood of other mammals in the sloth family. Not surprisingly there was little. A call to the Doctor informed her that she could order other samples.

They arrived the next morning.

By the time the weekend came Anne had found a small genetic difference in the DNA of the species of sloth with the natural anti-infestation properties. There was nothing in the blood plasma itself, nor was there anything to be found in the fur or dander she also ordered.

With not a lot of knowledge in the manipulation of DNA she had to call in Doctor Oswaldt.

When she showed him her findings, he beamed.

"Annie, Annie, Annie. Brilliant! I've been keeping tabs on the progress of the others, and unless someone is holding back I'd say you're a week ahead in just a couple days. If you will pardon me I have to make a phone call to register your success." He smiled at her again and reached out to give her a hug, "I am so proud of you!"

When Doctor Wiley Oswaldt got to his office he closed the door and picked up the phone. Dialing an eleven-digit number he waited until a man answered.

"Brad? Wiley. Anne's done it. She's better than you ever thought. Let your people know. Of course, I knew it from day one, but that is neither here nor there. The point is, we have a winner!"



## CHAPTER V

### AUTUMN SOCIAL, AND BEYOND

THE SCHOOL year came to an end but Anne barely noticed. She had signed up for a summer session that would allow her to get a few additional credits and, more importantly, she would be able to continue working in the basement lab.

To make things even more exciting, Doctor Oswaldt announced in early June that he was foregoing his usual summer break and trip with his wife to Europe. This year he would remain in the Boston area.

The very best thing of all was that he personally told Anne this while also asking if she might consider a summer internship with him.

"I have a nice research stipend," he explained, "that includes up to three thousand dollars per month for June and July for assistants. If you want the job and the money, the position is obviously yours."

Anne didn't know what to say, so she replied, "I don't know what to say. I do know my parents wanted to have me home, but I was going to get a job anyway and wouldn't see them much. I suppose that if I tell them we can have August together, without me working, they should love it. So, yes. I accept!"

Classes officially ended on June 3rd that year and the next day she signed the paperwork to remain in her dorm room over the next two months, arranged to take part in the school's summer meals program, and reported to Wiley Oswaldt.

Four afternoons a week they met, talked about science both historically and new advancements on the horizon, and worked on his project until late in the evenings. Most of the work was rather boring what with school rules not allowing her to operate some of the more exciting equipment such as the small electron microscope he kept in the laboratory.

But, Doctor Oswaldt wanted Anne to get the most out of the two months and so he often allowed her to do a bit more than he

probably should. It was their little secret.

What was most fascinating to Anne were the conversations. It was a two-way avenue where it often seemed that she picked his brain at the same time he was picking hers. The free discussion of things that she would not be "taught" for at least another year or more made the days flash past.

All too soon, and with the long-term project only about a third complete, she had to say goodbye.

"Ah, my dear young girl," he told her when tears welled up in her eyes, "it will be but a short five weeks until we see each other. And I must tell you, confidentially because this is so against the rules of what an older man and someone who is your teacher is supposed to say to someone your age, but I shall miss you like the very dickens. You are, in a sense, like a daughter to me. My wife and I have been, as they say, blessed with a single child but I do not see her much during the school year."

He gave her a big hug and held her for a minute while she sobbed. She wasn't certain why she was crying, only that she felt an oncoming sense of loss.

Wiping her eyes with a tissue he pulled from a box on his desk, she told him, "I don't know why you have chosen me to have the great advantage of your wisdom and teachings, but I want to thank you, Doctor Oswaldt. I'll be right at your door in five weeks!"

He smiled at her. "Anne? I believe that when it is just the two of us, in this office or in the lab, it will be fine for you to call me Wiley. I would like that *very* much."

Her five weeks at home were both a misery and exciting.

She tried to pick up on the relationship she had started the previous summer but her heart wasn't into it. That was okay with the boy as he felt guilty about having been seriously dating another girl in Anne's absence. They wished all the best to each other and went separate ways.

Her relationship with her mother was something that had almost magically changed. For some reason they could now talk

about nearly anything, almost as if they were more like friends. It boggled her mind and amused her mother, and wasn't until Anne asked her father about it that he provided the answer.

"My darling daughter, you have become a wise, old woman rather than a hormonally-driven young teenage girl. From this point on I think you and your mother will become closer than ever before! Just do me one favor. If the two of you feel the need to discuss female bodily functions or sex, do so when I am out of earshot. Especially that last one!"

That discussion and his hug afterwards made her feel safe and loved.

It was a difficult two days before she was to return to school. More than ever, she was torn between wanting to remain at home to explore this incredible relationship she had been forming with her mother, and with her overwhelming desire to get back to help Wiley Oswaldt with the research project.

But, back she went.

With Darla having a single semester remaining before graduation, she and Anne started having dinner together at least once a week. It was on the third week that Darla suggested Anne come investigate her sorority.

"It isn't like you haven't been there before, Anne," she explained, "but now that you can join, the girls are allowed to be friendly and open with you."

It took very little to convince Anne that the GRL Sorority was filled with kindred spirits. Most of them were on their way to professional or scientific degrees. Of the seventy or so active members, thirty-eight of them lived in the house full time while the others lived in dorms, apartments, and—when necessary—in one of the two, six-bunk spare rooms.

She pledged, was almost unanimously accepted, and was happy when her initiation included nothing more dastardly than having to put on so much makeup that nobody would recognize her and then to go to the Kappa Delta Sigma fraternity and kiss the first person answering the front door... on the mouth.

Kappa Delta Sigma, or KDS, was the brother chapter to her

own GRL. As it turned out, the "KiDS" and "GiRLs" had a long-standing association.

When the door opened, a slender six-foot, blond-haired and blue-eyed man—among the bluest eyes she had ever seen—was standing there, looking extremely uncomfortable. From behind him came the chant, "Kiss, kiss, kiss..."

Someone standing just out of sight must have given the shy young man a hearty push as he came flailing out of the door and into Anne's arms.

*Now or never*, she told herself as she reached up taking the back of his head in her right hand and pulling him down into a kiss. According to rules it had to be at least five-seconds long and she counted, slowly, until she could feel him begin to shake.

As was protocol she then stepped back, said, "I am a GRL and I have delivered my kiss. A good evening to you, sir." With that, she turned and raced down the steps and fled into the night.

The three sorority sisters who had been detailed to ensure compliance met her at the street corner, offered her several makeup remover towelettes, and took her out to a nice dinner at a local seafood place.

"Wow," Darla told her, having volunteered to be one of the three, "you got a good one there, Anne. That's Damon Swift. Ever heard of him or his family?"

Anne admitted she had not.

"Well, his grandfather was Tom Swift, the famous inventor from before World War One, and his grandfather was Barton Swift who invented something to do with torpedoes the Navy still uses today. He's brilliant and will be rich some day. Take my advice and go after that one!"

Anne wasn't so sure. The kiss had barely been returned and was a little on the limp side. But, she realized there had been a microsecond of tongue contact as she withdrew. Hmmmm?

Classes were concentrating on human biology this semester and Anne was excelling at everything. She kept herself so far ahead that the time she and Wiley spent on the research project had no impact on her schooling or her perfect grades.

Her social life, on the other hand, was practically stagnant other than the weekly dinner with Darla.

The senior told her on night in late October, "Anne? You're gonna have to take a plunge by yourself if you let this dry spell go on after Christmas. I'm out of here on December 22nd and won't be able to help you. However, between now and then is the Autumn Social between the girls and kids. I intend to drag you there, in chains if I have to, and make certain you get a proper introduction to that Damon Swift boy."

Anne sighed. "What makes you think he might be: A, available; and, B, interested?"

Darla tapped the side of her nose and winked knowingly. "Let's just say a little birdie told me that your kiss had Damon Swift all aflutter for three days, and that he was asking if anyone knew who you are."

Now intrigued, Anne's mind began to ponder the possibilities. He was, after all, very handsome, and he was going to be rich... but as she came to that thought she realized that she was inheriting more than a million dollars from the family trust, so money wasn't all that much an issue, and also that money wasn't one of her driving factors.

He *was* handsome! Plus, thinking back, the kiss hadn't been all that limp.

The dance might have had a rough beginning with Damon finding it difficult to approach Anne for even a dance in the first hour, but as one or two spikings of the punch bowl loosened everyone's inhibitions a little, he screwed up the courage to come over to talk to her.

"I guess I am speaking to the girl who kissed me the other week?"

Anne nodded. "It is a pleasure to finally meet you under less than, 'You must do this thing,' conditions. I'm Anne Douglas and I take it from what I've heard that you are Damon."

"That's right," he told her seeming to be surprised she knew his name. "Damon Swift. How do you do?" he inquired. "Oh, and I have to apologize for the lousy kiss I think I gave back. Not

much practice, you see."

She wasn't entirely certain why, but Anne's heart was beginning to pick up speed. It wasn't quite racing but there was something about this unassuming, handsome boy... no, she told herself, this handsome *man* that intrigued and excited her.

"Not at all. Don't worry about that; it all was sort of forced. I just hope that you might give me an opportunity to give you a proper kiss some time."

Anne wanted to slap her own face and put several layers of tape over her mouth. She could not believe she had just been that brazen!

Damon could see that she regretted being so forthright and smiled at her. "I believe I would enjoy that very much, Miss Douglas. Or, can I call you Anne?"

Anne Douglas began to melt. His eyes pulled her in, his not-too-deep yet quietly powerful voice gripped her, and she could only find strength enough to nod.

They spent most of the remaining two hours sitting and talking but did manage to get in three nicely slow dances before the university rules insisted that the party halt. It was eleven o'clock.

Damon walked Anne out to her car, parked two blocks away. She had told him it wasn't necessary but hoped like the dickens he would insist. He nearly let her go but plucked up enough courage to shake his head and tell her, "No. I think I would feel much better knowing you got to the car safely."

While the goodnight kiss they shared—Anne taking the initiative again—wasn't exactly passionate, it was warm and many times better than the first kiss.

She went back to her room and found it strangely difficult to get to sleep.

Classes kept her busy for several weeks. The research project with Wiley was coming to a close with only a few things to tie up. Another research team had taken the initial findings of Anne and Wiley and raced ahead. It wasn't within the rules to steal another team's work, and so the research event was called to an

end with no award of money or fame, but Anne felt a sense of accomplishment nonetheless.

Wiley, for his part, was enormously pleased with how she had been leading their team. It was not in his nature to assume command when somebody else was better suited or qualified, plus it wasn't his job to solve something that had already been done three years earlier—with a negative result supported by the following year's attempt—when he was merely supposed to be watching Anne and her progress.

As school drew closer to Christmas, Darla and Anne spent a teary evening together over their last weekly meal. Darla was heading west and up to British Columbia in Canada where her parents had just relocated after living in the States for ten years. She had, as she told Anne, a job waiting for her in a serum research company in Vancouver and would miss their friendship but hoped they might keep in touch.

Anne hoped so as well, but realized the school friendships often disappeared after graduation.

As she was getting out of her car back at the dorm, Anne was startled by the approach of a man from the shadows. She wasn't sure whether to jump back into the vehicle or run, but the man's voice stopped her.

"Anne? I had to see you tonight."

She spun to find Damon coming to her, a worried look on his face. Without contemplating what it might mean she practically flew into his arms and kissed him.

It was quite passionate this time and lasted almost a minute before she released her grip and eased back to the ground.

"Wow!" he managed to get out in a hoarse whisper.

She nodded. "Wow is right. You really *can* kiss when you let yourself be taken by surprise." She was about to add that she hoped he'd let her surprise him more often when he took her by the hand.

"Let's walk," he suggested.

During their thirty-minute stroll around the buildings he managed to get out that he had very strong feelings for her and

was miserable at the thought of not seeing her for more than three weeks over the holiday break.

"Is there any hope of my getting a positive answer to asking if you might stay here that time?"

Anne's sad face gave him the answer he thought she was about to articulate, and seeing his disappointment she gave him another kiss.

"It isn't that I wouldn't want to, Damon, it is just that my folks expect me to come home. But, I have a counter proposal. Come home with me. We've got a spare bedroom and I'm certain they would love to meet you. I've told them how close we've become in a couple months. Mother is especially curious."

He was overjoyed and agreed to it. "Dad is busy trying to keep the Swift Company up and running these days so he and I wouldn't have much time together anyway, so, absolutely!"

It had been a glorious time with Damon joining them two days after Anne got home. By the time it came for them to return to school, they were falling in love. Anne wanted to shout it out loud and knew she couldn't, not yet, and Damon was so nervous about telling her how he felt that neither mentioned it.

The next semester Anne found it difficult to concentrate on school and research until Wiley took her aside one day and told her to "pull your thumb out, my girl!"

It shocked her, but she nodded and admitted she was otherwise emotionally occupied.

"Yes, everybody knows, and even Damon Swift's advisor is asking for me to help you two through this wondrous time in your young lives. And, we cannot tell you what you need to do, but I would think it is obvious. Find some very private place and private time and... well, get over your mooncalfing. If you get my none-too-gentle drift."

It took a couple weeks during which she had to retake a particularly difficult test on the human circulatory system, but they managed to get over their "mooncalfing" and both admitted they were very much in love by spring break.



The final weeks back in school were more focused for them both. She took over a research project a man had been working on when he had to leave school to take care of his dying mother. It dealt with finding a way to clot the blood without the use of constant drug therapy.

Wiley was quite enthusiastic about it although he never articulated why. Together they finished the project just one week after the end of school—with mixed yet interesting results using a powdered form of chitin from ground beetle shells that could form an almost instant artificial clot on wounds up to a half-inch.

She had been so busy the final four days that she hadn't spoken to Damon. Now, she was afraid he might have gone back to his home town in upstate New York, to the small community called Shopton, without saying goodbye.

Her heart ached as she dialed her phone.

It rang and rang, each ring bringing more of an ache to her chest.

"Hello? It's Damon. Is this you, Anne?" his hopeful voice said to her.

"Yes. Oh, Damon, I've been such a butthead with the research and all. Can you—"

"Meet me outside your dorm in five minutes and go to dinner with me and then call your parents to tell them I am spiriting you up to Shopton for at least a couple weeks of sailing, sunning and, I'll make the assumption you're still interested, some kissing? Was that the end of your sentence?"

"Yes, please, even if it wasn't what I was going to say."

The summer, or the five weeks of it they spent together, was wonderful, and the nightly phone calls kept them close the next seven weeks before they got back to Boston.

With this being Damon's senior year, and his already being accepted for his postgraduate degree in Space Materials Engineering at Stanford in California, he absolutely had to knuckle down and work extra hours to complete his studies at MIT.

Anne promised to help in whatever way she could, even if that meant only seeing him once or twice a week. She had her own studies to get on with.

Besides, she secretly hoped to be able to graduate with her Biology degree half way through the year after Damon left for the West Coast.

Just as soon as she found out about his Stanford acceptance—and had gotten over the near panic of not being able to see the man she loved—she had begun investigating her own possible Post Grad work at the same university.

But, with a deep desire to look further into the field of Microbiology she soon discovered that nearby U.C. Berkeley was going to be her best bet. The two schools were on opposite sides of the San Francisco Bay, but in practical terms a half hour from one another.

All during her Junior, and his Senior, year they dated when they could, often spending weekends in a small cottage up the coast in Gloucester. When back in school they were both concentrating so hard on their studies that time raced past and all too soon it was their final summer together.

But, Damon understood when she told him she was doing extra credit projects that summer so she could accelerate them being together in California. As much as he could, he spent his time in Boston, even when he discovered that the family business was starting to have financial woes.

There was little he could do about it other than to take his mind off of it in the arms of Anne Douglas.

## CHAPTER VI

### NASA

"YOU are hereby awarded your undergraduate degree in Biology with a concentration on Medical Research Projects and a special certificate in Microbiology. Congratulations, Anne Douglas. Please, as this year's Valedictorian, take the microphone."

Anne gave a heartfelt speech telling her fellow students, faculty members, parents and honored guests how excited she was to be able to tell them... and the rest of her speech was delivered on a form of auto-pilot. Chief on her mind on this cold winter's afternoon was getting packed up and on her flight to San Francisco the next morning.

Damon would be there to pick her up, give her the grand tour, and get her settled in her new apartment.

She had a surprise visit the day before graduation by Bradly Arnold, who had put in an appearance to tell her that—along with her scholastic honors—she would continue to receive a full scholarship in her new school, including a monthly stipend enough for her housing and basic food costs.

"Why?" she asked him point blank.

"Because," he started, looking her directly in the eyes, "you are one of the outstanding students and I am the man in charge of paying out the money to assure that people such as yourself continue to master their fields. And, Microbiology along with a new field of Microbial Biology, needs you, Miss Douglas. Enough to pay whatever it takes."

She had nodded. It was all strange, but she had nothing in her life to compare this sort of thing to, so she had to take it for what it appeared to be.

After leaving her, Bradly Arnold had made a brief phone call consisting of him hearing a *boop*, then saying, "Sir. Brad Arnold. Miss Douglas has excelled and will continue to do so. She will be on flight Air TransAmerica one-one-seven-six to SFO the day after tomorrow." And, with that he hung up.

Stepping into the terminal from the jumbo jet in which she'd found herself sitting in First Class in an "un-used" seat with an on-the-spot upgrade, Anne lost her breath. It wasn't the terminal, or the idea of starting a new portion of her life, it was from nerves over being minutes away from seeing Damon for the first time in four months.

She had to go over and take a seat in the waiting area for a moment. A nearby airline employee came over to see if she was all right.

"Yes, just scared to see my boyfriend in more than a third of a year."

The woman patted her on the shoulder and told her to remain there a minute. At about the end of that time an inter-terminal electric cart rolled up close to her.

"Miss? I think I'm supposed to pick you up. You the one with nerves about the boyfriend?" the middle-aged black woman asked with a big smile.

"That's me. Scared, little girl all alone in the big city." She rose, nodded her thanks to the airline woman standing at the counter now, and climbed on the cart.

As they came around the final corner, and Anne spotted Damon, her heart fluttered so hard she saw stars in front of her eyes.

The driver reached over and squeezed her forearm. "Just a few more seconds, child. If we're heading for that blond, skinny, I mean slender, man who is waiving like he's hopin' ta lose an arm, you got to get yourself together. He's a doozey. Good on you, girl!"

"He is all that, ma'am."

Damon grabbed her the split second she crossed the "do not enter" line and swung her around.

"I have so missed you. Even with nightly calls I've been going crazy waiting for you to get here. I love you, Anne."

She could barely unbury her face from his chest. It just felt

right to be there. "I love you, too, Damon."

On their drive he explained to her that he had found out his Master's degree course was being lengthened to add a semester because of the addition of one new professor.

"Fortunately, all six of his mandatory classes can be finished in one semester and not two. The good news is that you and I will graduate with our degrees within three months of each other."

Anne was gloriously happy, but had to ask, "Then what?"

Damon pulled the car over to the curb and shut it off.

"Well, then we put this to good use," and he pulled out a small velvet-covered box, opened it and took out a beautiful diamond ring, "and we get married and then make a few babies and live happily ever after!"

The constant tapping of a police wood baton on the driver's side window startled them. As Damon rolled down the window Anne wiped the happy tears from here eyes.

"You folks oughta know that parking along here and smooching and all for more than at least the five minutes I've been pulled up behind you is frowned on. So, license, registration and an explanation, sir?"

As he pulled out his wallet Damon explained their recent engagement. The officer looked across him and to Anne who held up the brightly sparkling ring and wiggled her finger.

"Yeah? Okay. Forget about the license and all that, and I hope you two have a happy life. And, please move along after I pull out."

He smiled, tipped his hat to them and got into his patrol car.

The three years flew by with Damon finding that he had a job offer a full year before graduation with NASA. It meant that he was going to have to take the job right after graduation as the assignment included working on the new Mark 2 Space Shuttle program.

They agreed it was for the best to take the "bird in the hand" and it would give Anne the opportunity to double up on her

classes and finish not just her Masters in Microbiology, but a Doctorate in Microbial Biology, among the first fifteen—and the only female—in the inaugural parallel program to her Masters.

She had precious little time in her learning schedule for research projects, but did manage one her second full year in which she needed to discover a way to separate two bacterium from themselves and from the host blood cells. It required her to first learn the operation of a new type of electron microscope—she had learned on an older Philips model under Wiley's guidance—but had fueled her interest in life's smaller and smaller organisms.

She took five days off to marry Damon Swift, and to perform all the functions necessary to change her name to Anne Douglas Swift, and to have three days and two nights at Lake Tahoe for their abbreviated honeymoon.

They came back, exhausted, and packed Damon up for his move.

"I'll see you every night in my dreams," he told her, "and then in less than months when you get shed of that rickety old campus across the Bay!"

There had been a good many tears that last night together and even more at San Francisco International the next morning when he had to go through the Security checkpoint and disappeared.

Anne Swift had never worked so hard and so constantly in all her life to finish her studies. She was carrying a very hard load of classes and still had to find the time to finish her Master's Thesis. The subject matter was well known to her; she was writing about discovering the thyroid cancer cure from her high school days. It was digging out the old research and organizing it. She had it all absolutely straight in her head but the paperwork was killing her.

About a month after Damon moved to Florida she received a phone call from Bradly Arnold asking if he could drop by to see her.

"I'm in the area looking at a couple of promising kids down in San Jose and remembered that you are out here. Got any time?"

"You want to know something, Mr. Arnold, I do not have the time... but I need to take it. Name the time and place."

He did and it turned out to be an incredible restaurant in the nearby Berkeley city center. When she arrived he was already at a table. She had to maneuver her way through a waiting line of more than fifty people, each one scowling at the person who dared try to get in front of them, only to be greeted by the Maître 'd as if she was a long-time and valued patron. He showed her personally to the table where Bradly shook her hand and smiled at her.

"If I may, I would like to call you Anne."

She nodded. "Of course. It's my name. Can I do the same?"

He shook his head. "No. My name is not Anne, but you can call me Brad."

She had to laugh. That was unexpected and it broke the ice.

Over their meal he told her that a company in Florida, located about three miles from the small house Damon was living in, had expressed an interest in hiring one of the Microbial Biologist from the inaugural class she was part of.

"When I heard that, and recalled that your husband is out there, I put two and two together. I would love to get you in a videoconference with them in the next day or three. Maybe thirty minutes? I can even bring my portable system to you so you don't need to travel."

Anne was shocked but liked the idea of moving out to a ready job just as Damon had. She had been fearing that all her schoolwork would be wasted for up to a year while she searched for a suitable position.

"Tell me more about the company."

He did. It was a blood research facility, in operation about five years so far, with dealings with most major blood banks as well as hospitals and law enforcement agencies throughout the South and East Coast of the U.S.

"They perform a lot of mundane blood testing for DNA, drugs, etc., but they also do research into plasma-related transmission of diseases and hereditary issues like hemophilia

and sickle cell."

Anne considered her next question. "How safe will I be? I do want to start a family in the not too distant future."

"Well, I can't answer that, but if we head out to somewhere less fancy than this after we eat, then we can make the video call. I'll let them know."

She didn't want to ask what in the world someone would be doing up and ready for such a call three time zones ahead, so she simply speared a piece of the scallop she was eating and popped it into her mouth as he pulled out his cell phone and tapped the screen.

"Say, sorry to keep you waiting, Marc," he said to whomever answered, "but I am sitting in a very nice restaurant enjoying the company of Anne Swift, or as you originally knew her, Anne Douglas." He listened a moment. "That's right. Now, she hasn't said yes or no to me and I think it will be best if I can get you to talk to her as soon as possible." More listening, then, "Great. I'll suggest that. Hang on..."

He covered the mouthpiece with his left palm.

"This is Marc Stein at the blood serum lab. I must tell you that I have been keeping him abreast of you for nearly a month. If you want to run, screaming into the night over the weirdness of this, I will understand, but this is a great opportunity for you to get a few years of top flight research and hands-on work under your belt while your husband is trying to keep that shuttle program on track. Will you speak with him now, or should I set up something for tomorrow?"

Anne reached out and took the phone from his hand.

"This is Anne Swift," she said proudly. "And, assuming that Bradly Arnold isn't playing me for a fool, I think I would be very interested in coming to see you just as soon as I move out to be with my new husband in some little backwater village called Rockledge."

"Anne, it is a pleasure to finally get a chance to speak with you. I know you can't or won't want to blather on sitting there with Brad, but I have a position your skills would be a perfect



match for and I am in such a bind filling it. I will tell you right now that I'm authorized to agree to just about any salary you name. Within some level of reason, of course. So, and forgive me if I am not letting you get a word in, if you will allow me to offer to pay for your flight out here after you pack things up for your move, and get you in the following morning to see our little facility, I'm hoping I can get you to sign up and become our microbial expert. Well?"

She pulled the phone away from her ear and looked at it a moment. She put it back to her ear. "The 'well' of it, Mr. Stein is I am intrigued but I don't understand what I might be getting into letting you pay to fly me out to someplace I am already going. How do I repay you if I don't take the position?"

He laughed and asked her to have Brad describe paid job interview trips. A minute later he was gone and the caramel flan she had ordered for dessert was being placed in front of her. As she ate it, Bradley Arnold provided her with a brief education on how businesses run.

By the next morning she had decided to forego the graduation ceremonies and just ask for her sheepskins to be sent to the address of their little house. When reminded by the horrified woman at the school office Anne was to be the keynote speaker due to her being the first woman ever to go through the dual program, the new Mrs. Swift almost relented.

She was saved by that same woman who asked if she might be willing to provide a prerecorded video address.

"Just eight or nine minutes, and the school's video department will build you a nice set and do everything. You just need to bring your speech."

The address had been recorded in only two attempts, and she was promised the best from both would be all anyone saw.

There had been three more conversations with Marc Stein and one of his managers in Florida to get a better idea of what she should come ready to discuss. The manager would not be the person her position reported to, and so he told her, confidentially, that she had the position assuming she wanted it.

"Your academic record speaks for itself, and having been the

co-developer of the thyroid cancer cure—something I need to personally thank you for as it saved my grandfather's life—doesn't hurt your case. I look forward to shaking your hand!"

School over, address in the hands of the editor, and her meager belonging packed, Anne stepped into the Boeing jet at SFO airport and took her seat in First Class. It had and had not surprised her, but she told herself not to get used to this sort of thing.

*Of course, once I turn thirty and get the inheritance...* she thought but put the matter out of her mind.

Damon met her at the airport in Jacksonville and they drove down the Florida coast never letting her left hand and his right let go.

"I hope you get as much of a kick out of one of the streets close to the house as I do," he told her, but would say no more, only suggesting she keep an eye out.

I-95 was a fairly good freeway and the trip was made at only eight or nine miles per hour over the posted limit. They passed Titusville and later of an interchange with a state highway designated as 528.

"That goes to the main bridge over the Cape Canaveral, Anne. Kind of through the upper part of Cocoa which is just north of our town of Rockledge."

As he swung their car from the freeway onto highway 520 he remarked that this road led both close to their home and also was the way he took to get to work.

"Shorter and a lot less crowded except on launch days." It was a few minutes later as he turned off onto South Fiske and a little later took a right that Anne suddenly laughed.

"I see it!" she exclaimed. "That's it, isn't it? Barton Boulevard? For your great grandfather? Coincidence or planned?"

"Pure coincidence, but gives me a good feeling."

Their little neighborhood contained what he said were classified as "Patio Homes." Not that they featured much in the way of a patio, "But, they have the two and three-bedroom

houses set on what most folks would call a decent-sized patio slab.

The one he pulled up to had a 2-car garage on one side and at least five large trees in the side yards and the back. Anne fell in love with it immediately and proclaimed it to be "perfect!" for the two of them.

"Or, maybe more," she said teasingly.

The next morning Damon pulled open one of the garage doors and showed her the small foreign runabout he had purchased.

"Now, if you hate it, we can take it back just as long as you make up your mind before Friday and don't put more than a hundred miles on it."

She told him she loved it and loved him and loved the house and was going to love the job interview she realized she needed to get to.

She was correct about the job. The interview had been with five people starting with Marc Stein, introduced as both the owner as well as Chief Executive Officer. Patton Bell was his V.P. and the others were Tommy Jones, a beautiful woman originally from Texas who handled the HR duties, Bob Greene, the manager she would report to if she took the job, and Brendan Buckley, a man perhaps three years older than Anne who was filling in on the job but whose responsibilities normally were in DNA identification.

"Assuming these people are smart enough to hire you, Mrs. Swift, I will be most anxious to vacate your office and get back to some simple horizontal lines and dots on white paper in my little cubicle!"

Before leaving she signed her employment agreement but told them she needed the rest of the week and weekend to get settled from the trip.

Over the following twelve months she discovered that the work was more fascinating than she might have hoped, and that she had just become pregnant.

She was overjoyed even though they both had planned to

wait a couple years, and Damon was greatly pleased because it made Anne happy beyond belief.

They each worked very hard at their respective jobs with Anne only taking a month off after their son, named Thomas in honor of the boy's great grandfather, but called Tommy because of Anne's wonderful friendship with Tommy Jones at work.

By the end of her second year at the research facility, Anne had taken over management of the small department when her manager decided to move to Hawaii and start a new life as a photographer and author.

Anne, for her part, was about to enter into a new phase of her life. With Tommy now ten months old, Anne and Damon were looking forward to the birth of their second—and almost certainly last—child. This one was going to be a girl. All Anne hoped for was that the child be healthy, and her doctors all told her every sign was that it would be.

So, the forthcoming party was to be her going away party for the two months she intended to take off for the baby and to celebrate her second year at the company. Everyone said how sorry she wasn't going to be there for the company's anniversary celebration in six weeks, but she was definitely invited in case she and Damon could come.

The night of her party, the CEO slipped out and headed back to his office to make a phone call.

"Hello. This is a message from Marc Stein at the Cocoa Blood Serum Lab in Florida for Bradly Arnold. I just wanted to tell you that Anne Swift has excelled herself in everything we have given her. She has to be the most competent biologist I've ever seen. I know you wanted to hear about her. Anyway, I have to say that she is top notch! The only thing is, I want to keep her here as long as I can. I really hope you can do without Anne for another couple years *at the very least.*"

## CHAPTER VII

### FIDDLING BITS AND FAILING SHUTTLES

MOTHERHOOD became Anne Swift. She continued to work at the research center but now only four days a week. Little Tommy and his beautiful sister, Sandra—or San-deeeee as she had been christened by her brother—were blonde of hair and deep blue of eye, and both showed early signs of being very smart for their ages.

With eleven months separating them, and Anne feeling that two were enough, she and Damon agreed that this was it for them.

Already becoming a good home cook, Anne took several weekend-long classes at a culinary school in Miami, honing her skills and finding that she loved the more scientific side of cooking, it harkening back to her cooking course at the girls' school. Nearly everything in the kitchen came down to a scientific process whether it be browning a sausage or baking a cake.

Something in the preciseness of the baking side and the random and forgiving side of other cooking really appealed to her.

There were a few flops. Her attempts to interest Damon in lamb had fallen flat the first two times when she made lamb chops and then a roasted leg of lamb. Finally she purchased some ground lamb, dug out a recipe from one of the schooling sessions and make a meatloaf from it. Lamb-loaf was not to be one of her shining moments.

The recipe called for the addition of a loose tablespoon of orange zest. Florida, being known for oranges, would seem to be a natural for this, but when she went to the local market all they had were greenish oranges from South America, the local season being more than a few months away.

And so, she purchased a small jar of dehydrated orange peel.

Where she went horribly wrong was in not recalling she ought to use a fourth or even a fifth of the dried compared to fresh zest.

To say the loaf had been inedible would be an enormous understatement. Even the neighbor's dog that came scratching at their back door took a sniff and hightailed it back to its own

yard, refusing to take a lick.

Damon pulled her into his lap after they came back from getting hamburgers.

"It's okay, Anne. Just as long as you promise that the closest I come to having lamb in the future is if you have some at a restaurant. I've just never been a big fan. Probably because my maternal grandmother used to host all the big eating holidays and all she ever served was leg of lamb."

Anne sniffled. "Sorry."

He chuckled. "Nothing to be sorry about, She's the one who ruined it for me with old, tough mutton cooked until it was bone dry and pretty nasty. I love you, anyway."

She kissed him and went into their kitchen to put the 99.9% of the leftover load into the garbage and took it outside.

As Tommy reached the age of three and Sandy almost two, Anne went back from three-quarters time to full-time work. Some rather intriguing things were beginnings happen in the research side of her job, and they really required her a good eight hours a day. At least.

For one, a blood bank in Savannah, Georgia, had sent them a full 500 ml bag of whole blood with a very odd characteristic. Taken supposedly from a single donor, it showed aspects of being two distinct blood types—it seemed to be both A+ as well as O -.

The mystery was solved a week later when Anne finally requested the donor's complete medical history. It turned out that the young woman had been the recipient of a bone marrow transplant five years earlier. It now appeared that she had been mis-matched and her normal A+ blood type body had received donor cells from an O - man.

It was a wonder she hadn't rejected the new marrow and even possibly have died.

As it was, she did go into remission on the type of leukemia she was suffering from. However, that left the issue with her having been allowed to donate blood. As a cancer survivor she should automatically be precluded from any donor program.

Anne could have left it at simply finding the solution to the blood type issue, but in the back of her mind were many

questions for which she wanted to have answers.

She requested a 4-day weekend and, with Damon's blessing, drove their larger car north starting out Thursday evening. Her overnight stop was in Jacksonville where she stayed with a college friend and Sorority sister from her days in Boston.

Bright and early the next morning she headed north arriving at the blood bank that had provided the sample in the early afternoon. She presented her credentials at the main desk and asked to speak with the company's manager.

When the man came out he took her back to his office and sat down looking rather sweaty and uncomfortable.

"What can I do for you, Mrs., uhh, Swift. The phone call we received from your, uh, Mr., uh, Stein only mentioned that you are investigating us. Uhhh, why?"

Anne looked at the nervous man. "Well, first let's make a deal. I took several public speaking classes and so things such as 'uhhhh' and other non-words annoy the heck out of me. Take a breath, calm down and don't let your nerves make you sound like you have no right being in your position. Okay? Anyway, I am not here to investigate you. I am here to try to find out where the blood sample—your sample 99-2111-57B-F-200—came from."

"Uhh, sorry! I meant to say, is that all?"

Anne nodded.

"Well, then let me pull the records up on my computer and we can have you back on your way in a minute or two." Now, he looked both relieved and happy that he might get rid of Anne quickly.

"Here it is. It came from the Savannah Memorial... oh. No, it didn't. They received it from a private doctor, tried typing it, and failed. They passed it along to us and, golly, Mrs. Swift. We couldn't type it either. Ah, here's the note saying we sent it down to you folks. I'm not blood guy, I'm an administration man, but these notes don't seem right. Here, look."

He turned his screen around and showed her.

After reading them she leaned back in her chair. "That is some strange sequence of events. No name for the supplying doctor and no address. Just an indication he dropped it off at the

hospital and they sent it to you. Can you call the hospital and tell them I am on my way over. I need to get to the bottom of this."

He agreed and was picking up the receiver as she let herself out.

The hospital was only seven blocks away, but she drove it to save time. Once there she was ushered into the office of the Director of Phlebotics.

"What can the blood team do to assist you, Mrs. Swift?" the woman inquired.

Anne told her about her need to track down the sample's source.

When the woman brought up her files she raised an index finger to her mouth and began nervously chewing on the nail. "This isn't at all right. Our people should have flat out refused to take an unidentified and untracked sample like that. Oh, wait. It was an entire bag, wasn't it?"

"Yes. Does that make a difference?"

"I'm afraid it does. Georgia law allows anonymous donation of full containers of blood, plasma and platelets." She bit her lower lip. "I see from our notes that this presented some quite odd characteristics."

"We have a basic problem," Anne told her. "You have no indication as to the donor and yet we received a complete profile and got medical records for a donor. From this hospital!"

Three phone calls later and they were both sitting with the hospital Administrator and the Admissions Manager who had her laptop set up to call up any past patient records.

It took them an hour to decipher everything and to cut through a little bit of misinformation, but finally it became clear that the donor was a Dianna Dailey from nearby Garden City. She had been a transplant patient at the hospital five years earlier and their own records showed, properly, that she was precluded from donation of anything from blood to tissue and organs.

Anne borrowed the Administrator's phone and called the woman. On the speakerphone Dianna broke down and began crying.

"I needed the money and they told me they could sort of hide



who I was. Oh, god. Did someone die from my blood?" She was practically howling now.

Anne tried to quiet her down and finally got the woman to tell her the name of the facility where she gave the blood.

"Dianna? You have to promise me that you will not call them now or at any time ever in the future, and that you will never try to give blood again. Do you understand? Nobody died this time but we can't be certain that won't happen."

"Yes'm."

Anne's next call was to the Police who promised to meet her at the parking lot of the blood bank. When she arrived it was obvious they had been given some reason to act. Several officers were bringing out handcuffed people in white "scrub" clothes along with a few scruffy and sickly-looking individuals.

It took the rest of the weekend before the tale completely unraveled.

The facility was a licensed blood collection company but they had been making a lot of extra money by taking donations from anyone—even several donors with serious and life-threatening blood diseases—for more than two years. They had managed to hide identities by falsifying donor information, but the blood bag from Dianna Dailey had slipped by with a few pieces of real information on it.

The woman owning the facility was unapologetic, and even angry. She was also, Anne was to find out a week later, in the country illegally from her native Argentina.

By the time a month had passed she was notified that at least seven deaths over those two years could be traced back to the blood facility, and that the owner was facing enough charges to keep her in prison for the rest of her life.

"You seem to have taken some satisfaction over your detective work, Anne," Damon commented that evening.

She had to admit that he was right. Her only regret, and one she had zero control over, was that she wished she had been able to halt the illegal donations in time to save the needlessly lost lives.

The excitement and joy she did take increased her eagerness

to do more at the research facility, but also in the field.

Marc Stein agreed. He had seen a remarkable change in her attitude. Like many at the company, after a couple years the newness wore off and everything became "just another job."

"Anne, any other cases that come in with a mystery attached, you go right ahead and call 'dibs!' Okay? I want our best on the cases they can do the best with. You are our new in the field gal. Pardon the gender assignment but I can't bring myself to call you our 'man.'"

She laughed.

As she was relating the conversation to Damon that evening over a lasagna, she could tell he wasn't really paying attention.

She stopped her story and asked, "Something not so good going on?"

He looked at her before taking a deep breath and sighing.

"Yeah. At least I think something bad is happening. About to happen. You see, the first three launches of the new shuttle went well as far as the public is concerned. The unmanned first one landed and the news coverage showed a real NASA success."

"But?"

"But, it was only coming down from a height of fifty-three miles. The boosters took it up and around the ninety-mile circular path, but they almost did not disengage on schedule. In fact, the back-up emergency explosive bolts had to be activated instead of the newfangled hydraulic couplings. She came back down and landed, but had she been loaded with a crew of eleven like she can handle, plus all the atmospheric equipment, that extra five tons of weight would have meant that the shuttle would have plowed into the ground some one mile or more short of the landing strip over by Banana Creek." He looked at her and shook his head.

"We dodged a P.R. nightmare there."

Anne considered the implications before asking, "You made it sound like the other two tests didn't go all that well, either. Same problems?"

"The second launch also had problems with the hydraulics.

They manually popped the bolts early as the shuttle headed up into orbit. Nearly everything else went as planned, nominal as we say, you know, and the landing was dead perfect. In was the launch last week where we averted a disaster by about three seconds."

He couldn't articulate the problems for more than a minute. Finally he stood up, helped Anne to her feet and took her to the living room. Only after they sat and he had taken several deep breaths could he tell her the rest of the story.

"You know that I'm working on the environmental side of things. Everything having to do with air and heat and ventilation and even cooling not going on inside a space suit. There is a problem deep inside the shuttles. It's something that I warned several management types about last year after the unmanned flight. I have a suite of test equipment in the cabin monitoring what systems we did have installed and a pressure sensor that is connected to the shuttle's emergency systems shorted out."

"What does that mean?"

"It means that the ship landed with the front door ajar."

A sense of dread hit Anne fully in the face like an icy blanket.

"Ajar? As in the access hatch was open?"

"Yeah." He needed another minute to collect his thoughts, and she gave him all the time he wanted.

It had turned out that the same automatic system designed to quickly depressurize the cabin, open the locks for the five different ejection seat areas, and activate the ejection system in case there was an incapacitation of the crew, had clicked over. Luckily for the recoverability of the shuttle there were no explosive charges installed to blow off the panels and shoot all manned seats into the air.

But, the main hatch had unlocked and internal pressure had shoved it open a few inches.

"If that sensor misbehaves with a crew in there we have a recovery mission and a lost vehicle, Anne. And," he choked up a little, "at full dynamic pressures and above fifty thousand feet the crew would be pulverized on exit. Statistically unsurvivable."

"But, what is NASA doing about it?" Anne asked, horrified.

Damon could only shake his head.

"You can't mean..."

"The top people say the problem has been a fluke and is tied into a component that is being replaced in the first two shuttles off the line. The test one, *Kitty Hawk*, and the one we take delivery on early next year, the *Enterprise*. We have no scheduled launches until *Enterprise* goes up for her inaugural flight in thirteen months. Right now, that's on Tommy's fifth birthday. Oh, Anne, I so hope and pray that he won't remember that day as being the one the newest shuttle was destroyed!"

She got up and held him for many minutes until she just had to ask, "Is there anything that you can do with your equipment and systems to fix that or keep it from happening?"

Damon pulled back from his wife. "Absolutely nothing. And it is a really crappy feeling."

Work for both of the Swifts went smoothly for the next ten months before Anne had a near fatal encounter.

Marc Stein agreed to let her follow up on an investigation into a small area beset with a "social" disease epidemic. Fairly easy to treat, it was more an embarrassment than a danger, and yet in spite of more than thirty people in the cluster being given injections of penicillin and another, new medication, new cases were being diagnosed almost on a daily basis.

Her travels over to Louisiana and the small community of Lockport to the immediate southwest of New Orleans began well if not a little disheartening. She had been picked up by U.S. Forestry Department helicopter at the Lakefront Airport and flown to a pad set next to the water treatment facility at the north edge of town. She was met by the local police chief who also happened to be the entire local police department.

"Ma'am," he greeted her, unenthusiastically.

She tried to pass the time asking him a few questions about the area on the three minute drive to the small motel where she would stay the night, but the officer didn't seem at all interested. In fact, he only grunted once they had stopped to indicate it was time for her to get out.

"Well, nice speaking with you and you have a great rest of

your day," she called out as he roared off sending a cloud of dust and small gravel back into her ankles.

The woman who ran the motel explained that, "Bobby-Ray ain't much of a po-liceman and he shure ain't much of anything else more'n a high-capacity drinker and self-proclaimed gift ta women. Pay him no nevermind. Now, let's get you into the nicest room I got. That'd be number one. Two and three are about the same, 'cept two's got a leaky john and three's got some sort of bugs I cain't shift unless I want ta put down poison."

Once in her room Anne called Damon at work.

"Well, the air service was nice but I'm not going to have any fun nor make any friends around this small town."

"Bear with it, Anne. You have a meeting this afternoon?"

"Yeah. The reporting doctor who works about four miles up the road from here. Get injured in Lockport proper and you'd better know how to do first aid on yourself until he can get here."

"Stick with it and call when you get back. I'll be heading home in an hour or so. Love ya!"

"Love you, too."

She called the doctor who said he'd have his son come get her in about ten minutes.

The young man was barely old enough to have a learner's permit much less an actual license and drove as if he were on a tryout for NASCAR, but he got her back to the office skidding the back tires only twice on the primarily straight highway.

The doctor snorted when she asked if he had any reason to suspect a single individual.

"Single? No. Married? Yes. Pretty near every one of my patients can trace their woes back to the Lockport Po-lice department. Bobby-Ray Packer went into New Orleans and visited a house of ill repute and brought back the scourge about five months ago. I've told him to get in here and get hisself cured, but he won't do it. Says if his wife finds out he's been ta see me she'll know he's got the— well, you know."

"You do understand that I have no authority in this area, don't you?" she asked. "I was called in by the Physician General of Louisiana because you have to file paperwork on all these

cases. If you can't talk him into getting a lousy shot in the butt then I'm wasting my time here."

"Damn. Thought you could put a scare into him by telling him he either man's up and drops his trousers or the State'll be told about him and he might lose his job."

Anne had a headache now. It had come on during her racetrack drive to the doctor's office and was getting worse. She actually was regretting coming "into the field" on this case.

"I need to go," she told him. "Can you get you son to take me back at something less than speedway pace?"

"He's gone on to his girl's place. But, I can get you a ride. Lemme go make a call."

Anne wanted to do severe and very personal injuries to the doctor when she found that the police officer, Bobby-Ray Packer had been contacted.

To make matters considerably worse, the doctor had told the man Anne had something she needed to discuss.

It had not been a pleasant ride. She had informed him she knew of his condition and suggested he simply go to another nearby town and get the shot. He told her to mind her own damn business and to get out of town the next morning.

But, that had not put an end to it. At about one in the morning she was awakened by shattering glass from the front and only window in the motel room. Several additional rounds of gunfire pierced the night air and more glass rained into the room.

Anne hit the floor but dared a peek when she heard a car drive off. She saw the tail end of it.

She made two calls. One to the State Police Barracks and the other to Damon.

He had been practically beside himself at the news and said he would be there right away.

She told him, "Darling, Damon. I will be out of here at first light once the State can get the police chopper here and I'll be out of the state by seven thirty, long before you could even get to Louisiana. But, I'll tell you one thing. I now officially hate field work and never, never ever want to go back out again."

## CHAPTER VIII

### A FAMILY DISASTER TO FIX

FIVE WEEKS later a space shuttle disaster occurred. The newest round of shuttles had been a nightmare to construct and were problem-plagued from the start, but in the five launches of the new year there had not been a mishap.

Until now.

The general public's interest in launches had always been a fickle thing. The first Mercury launches had million upon millions of people glued to their televisions, even on the West Coast where most launches took place before six a.m.

Gemini was well watched until about the fifth launch, the one after the historic walk in space. Then, numbers began tumbling.

Apollo, with its initial disaster and the death of the three astronauts had people glued again to their sets. But, after the second successful launch, viewership dropped until Apollo 11 and the first man on the Moon. The next one had half the audience and it was only the near disaster of Apollo 13 that had people back watching that mission and the next.

And, so it went through the original shuttles where people watched the first few and then seemed disinterested for the most part until the two lost missions.

That was about the viewership pattern until the first disaster and the second, and then the original program ended.

When the civilian launches started, people tuned in, but like an auto race without crashes, there was not much to hold interest.

Public interest might have ended right there except private rockets only could do so much and a new, more modern space station needed to be built, and that was going to mean all new space shuttles. The first spacecraft of the two built had not been flawless but perception of their flights—to the public—never vaguely seemed troubled. To the engineers, like Damon, those first flights were nail-biters.

Once the second shuttle was delivered and both craft had completed a pair of near-perfect launches with payloads, everyone took it for granted that things were going to get boring again.

The *Kitty Hawk* took off one late November morning at dawn. Weather didn't seem to be a worry. As the saying goes, all systems were go and all readings were nominal.

Until the shuttle disengaged from its hydraulic mounts early, at the same time the cluster of six solid boosters did. One of them flipped to the side and pierced the shuttle causing it to break apart with the obvious loss of life.

Not everyone died. In fact, the ejector system that had finally been disengaged from the environmental systems at Damon's and others insistence, saved the Commander and one Mission Specialist.

The biggest issue in the Swift household had been over the previous four weeks that Damon believed he had located a different flaw, one in the programming of the launch sequence computer onboard. His programming experience did not include the proprietary language used in these new spaceships, but he could spot an error or omission if it were obvious.

To him, this one was.

He believed it snuck in with the change on the auto-eject systems and was not timed correctly. The problem is, nobody at NASA paid his worries any attention. They gave his reports a cursory glance and filed them away. Nobody actually looked at the strings of programming code he'd indicated.

Until the explosion.

Damon came home after midnight that day. Even if launches weren't a public ratings grabber, they were always an "all employees in attendance" event. It was never more so than when there was an "irregularity" with a launch or any part of a mission.

Damon was not part of the launch team—he was just an engineer who worked on various internal systems—but when the Feds swooped in an hour after the accident, he and all his



coworkers were herded onto large rooms and hangars to await questions and statements.

He looked at Anne who was sitting on their sofa as he closed the door just past midnight. Nodding at her his emotions finally broke through and he sank to his knees, sobbing. She was immediately at his side, holding him and rocking him.

"It's not your fault, Damon. It's just so damned unfair, but it isn't your fault," she gently told him.

A minute later he collected himself, stood up, and looked deeply into her eyes. "But, it was something I told them about. I knew something wasn't right but couldn't tell them exactly what or why, so they just ignored me as another worrier. I knew, Anne. I *knew!*"

The investigation lasted more than five months, but Damon found it emotionally necessary to resign little more than a month after the accident. He and about eighty percent of the other NASA professionals had been cleared quickly as the investigation homed in on a "computer systems" fault.

During that month nobody asked him about his previous warning. No mention was ever made about his three written reports.

At the end of that month he took a week of personal leave to go back to his hometown of Shopton located in upstate New York. He had drafted his resignation but had not turned it in.

Anne decided to give him some time to talk things over with his father, George Swift, the owner and President of the Swift Company.

The night before his flight out Damon turned to Anne as they lay in bed. "I really need to get the hell out of here for a bit and see if dad can help me put this in some sort of perspective. I don't want you to feel I'm abandoning you. Say the word and I'll pack you and Tommy and Sandy up and bring you along."

She shook her head. "No. You need some time away. Tell George that we all say hello, but you two need to talk. And, from the few times you took me up there, I'd say a couple beers down by the lake should be in order."

The flight was smooth with a stopover and change of aircraft in Albany, New York. The regional airport in Shopton could only handle propeller planes, small executive jets and commuter planes like the older Fairchild F-27 he found himself on for that last nineteen minute hop.

As he exited the plane, there stood his father, George Swift, looking a little tired but with a smile on his face. Damon didn't see the strain behind that smile or the sadness in the man's eyes.

They hugged and headed for the car. "Father. It's good to see you again. How are things?" Damon inquired.

His father's gaze dropped. "We can talk about that later. First, let's get your suitcases and take you home. I only wish that your mother were still with us. She'd be mighty proud of all you've accomplished."

Damon's mother, Marie, has passed away five years earlier while he was finishing his Masters studies at Stanford. It had been sudden and unexpected and had hit his father particularly hard.

Instead of taking Damon by the company, George headed for the family cottage near Lake Carlopa. Although he and Marie and Damon had once lived in a larger home a half mile away, George had felt uncomfortable in that large house once he was alone, and had moved back into the ancestral home of his father—the first Tom Swift—and Tom's father, Barton Swift.

They spoke of the accident in Florida and of Damon's determination to leave NASA as soon as he could secure other employment.

He finally asked his father about what might be available at the company.

George would say nothing specific other than to tell him that things were not good at the moment. But, on being pressed he finally said, "Oh, Damon, Damon, Damon," George practically moaned. "I don't even know if there *will* be a company in a week."

In spite of his protests, Damon insisted on going to the main office as soon as possible so he might examine the company

records. There he found a veritable horror story of how to not run what had once been a major industrial company making things for both the Government and private sectors.

Now, many of the employees had been let go—for the second time—with equipment and some supplies sold off to pay the most seriously late bills.

George didn't want to talk about things; he seemed to be emotionally immobile on anything having to do with the company finances. He also would not discuss the attitude of doom pervading the remaining employees.

In disgust Damon stormed from the office only stopping to ask Elizabeth Porter, the secretary, how to locate one employee he knew could give him the truth.

Thirty minutes later he sat in a darkened tavern watching the back of the man behind the bar.

"What's a nice advertising man like you doing in a dump like this?" he asked giving the man a smile when he turned around.

"Damon? My god, it is you. Well, I'll be. Prodigal son returns, or just another vacation?"

"Well, I'd intended it to be a great family reunion and the dawn of a new career, but—"

"Yeah. Right," the bar man said.

They walked over to a booth and sat down. Damon asked George Dilling, the former second in command of the advertising department at the company, "Can you tell me what went wrong?"

George laid out a story that made Damon's stomach clench. Mismanagement of clients, ordering supplies that would never be used, loss of contracts and failure to find new ones all had led to the present problems.

"She's about to close, George," Damon said. "What ever happened with that little car he was going to build? I saw a few things in the journals back at the office."

What had seemed like a unique project—build a small, two-person commuter car that could quite literally be folded up and

stored in less than one-third the space of even the smallest of other cars—had become an exercise in "death by change order." The designers had a solid design up front, but George Swift kept making them change things.

A few were meaningful changes but most were on the verge of being ridiculous.

Nearly three years had come and gone, most of the ready cash in the company had been squandered on the constant build and rebuild of the prototype, and things had gone from tenuous to very bad.

The assistant bar man took over and Damon and George sat discussing what could be done. By ten and closing time, they had a plan of action.

Three days later Damon brought the five most senior managers along with him and they paid a visit to George Swift. After announcing that he was appalled at the way the company had been allowed to crumble, Damon had made the ultimatum.

"Father, because of your mismanagement of this company, and because we can no longer allow it to continue if we want the company to survive—and *we do*—you are hereby removed as manager of the Swift Company."

Totally flustered, George managed to squeak out, "But this is... this is *mutiny!*"

"No, Father. This is your retirement. And, it starts right now!"

Father and son had made amends shortly after that. In truth, George Swift had never wanted to be part of the family business. It was at his father's insistence that he abandoned his desire to just be an invisible middle manager in some small company.

As the two men sat sipping drinks on the back porch of the old house, Damon made an announcement.

"Starting tomorrow I sell off some of the excess materials we have, finalize the design for the accordion car and get the company back into the black!"

George gave another snort and drained his second drink. "Just that?"

"Just that, Father."

He rehired George Dilling, then he called Anne and told her what was going on and what had transpired.

"How long do you give it, dear?" she asked, trying to hide the nervousness in her voice.

"If we can sell off our excess inventory and continue to limp along on the spare parts business, doing that for about four months before either we hit on something new, or the layoffs begin. Probably end the same day because that would just about suck the accounts dry."

"When do you want the three of us up there?"

He laughed. "Ah, Anne. I knew I could count on you. But, you have your position at the research lab."

She laughed. "The moment you started drafting your resignation, I handed mine in. Tommy is five and Sandy is four and it is time to get the heck out of this humid, bug-infested state and move to some place where raising children is a pleasure, not a chore. You work on the company and I'll get us on the way. Oh, and Marc Stein is giving me a very nice bonus that we can live off for several months!"

While she was getting their house in Florida ready for sale, Damon threw himself into getting the company back on its feet.

Hers was the easier task.

Damon examined all the plans and designs for the folding car. After a full day in the office and the weekend at home he called in the lead designer, a man he had only met once the previous summer, Rex Rhodes.

"Okay. What was the original intent and design?"

"Twin cylinder car about four feet wide by six long with more than ten hinged points and a couple of levers. Stop the car and let it cool down about ten minutes, then undo one locked lever and pull it up. That was supposed to spin the engine ninety degrees so that instead of being horizontal—by the way, it was two opposing cylinders, not like a V-2 or straight two—anyway it rotated to vertical after disengaging from the drive train."

"With you so far. What was next?"

"Well, let me think. It all got changed pretty bad eighteen months back. Oh, I remember! You had to be out of the thing before starting the process, for one. So, after flipping the engine, you pushed a button and three different electrical motors, running off the car's battery, rearranged things like the battery and the exhaust system plus they unlocked the steering wheel and folded up the seats. Then, you pulled down on a second handle and the car sort of folded up into a package about two feet thick, still six feet long, but only about four feet tall."

Damon asked them. "Did you ever get it to prototype?"

Rex told him about building the first chassis and engine before the constant changes halted that progress.

"Fine. Fine. Pull everything back out all the way to day one and let me take a look at it."

Damon and the design team made a few changes to the original design, one of which Rex admitted was, "Pure genius!"

Damon told them to build one.

Anne arrived with their two children two days later. Tommy had been invited into the cockpit to hear how the pilot would be taking off from Albany and was allowed to sit in the copilot's lap for a couple minutes "steering" the plane—that was still on the tarmac. He was so thrilled that he talked about it non-stop all the way to Shopton.

Sandy, realizing she wasn't the center of attention, looked out the window and pouted.

When he met them, Damon gave Anne a huge kiss and then took them to the small house he had just rented on the outskirts of Shopton. Small yet serviceable, he promised that it was temporary and a new house in a new neighborhood was a possibility in a year or less.

"It all depends on how your little car sells, doesn't it?" Anne asked. He nodded but told her he was hopeful.

The little car had been an initial failure until Anne suggested that attempting to sell a small convertible with no heater in only the cold, wet New England area might not be such a wonderful

or smart idea.

George and Damon worked on an advertising campaign with her assistance and previously untapped insight into marketing such things and soon were selling the cars about as quickly as they could be built. That was only about four per day, but it was keeping the company afloat.

With Damon now able to come home at night and unwind, Anne could also relax. She had been keeping the stress their father felt from the kids. To them, this was just a new and fun part of their lives.

Sandy loved the trips over to the lake. Anne started to teach her to dog paddle in the shallower water where Sandy could stand up if necessary, and where the sun kept the water from being Arctic cold.

Tommy took to swimming in the lake almost better than he had at the municipal pool back in Florida.

She also brought them both to the company to see their father every week or so. Tommy was more interested in peeking into the various workshops and the two larger buildings where the cars and a few other things were constructed. His mother had to hold his hand to keep him from running right up to the men and machines in his eagerness to see how things were made.

One strange, at least to Anne, thing that happened for about that first year was that Sandy started referring to herself in the second person. It became, "Sanee want a drink," and not, "I want a drink." And, besides learning how to push her older brother's buttons, she had perfected the crossed arms and pouting lip and stomping off routine when she failed to get her way on something.

Many days it was all Anne could do to not laugh out loud at her daughter's antics.

By the end of their first year in Shopton, Damon had the Swift Company back on solid footing with nearly all the old employees being hired back. The money from their savings account, Annes generous departing bonus, and investments had been cut by eighty percent, but they were now able to draw a salary for Damon's work so some of that was being put back.

Their little house was just that. And, being on a busy street Anne worried that her children might get outside and wander.

"Is there some way we could afford a place just a bit larger and on a quiet street?" she asked one evening after the children had been put in bed.

He smiled at her. "Ten steps ahead of you, Anne. Day after tomorrow, this Saturday, we will drop the kids off with their grandfather while you and I go to look at several model homes being put up in a nice, quiet, and very beautiful brand new neighborhood about a mile farther outside of town."

Anne was thrilled. She was even more thrilled that the kids seemed quite happy to stay a few hours with their grandfather. And, she was absolutely, positively thrilled when their real estate agent pulled up in front of a two story home on a double-sized lot.

"Nearly ready to be occupied," the woman told them. "Of course, if you want it and can commit before the end of this coming week, you can still have a say about the kitchen cabinets and layout, floor coverings, paint colors and a few other things." She looked at them as if requesting a commitment right that moment.

"Okay, that's nice to know, but let's go inside," Anne suggested.

They never got to the next house on the list. After walking inside and looking upstairs and down, they walked out the back door onto the deck and looked at the extra large back and side yard area.

"When does that one get built?" Damon inquired.

"Never. It goes with your... I mean *this* lot. It is about one thousand square feet too small to meet minimum lot requirements by the county, so it either gets made into a small neighborhood park that all residents have to pay a bit more tax to support, or the owners of this lot get it for an absolute song."

Anne looked at Damon, who looked right back at her. Her small and contented grin told him everything he wanted to know.

"Name that tune," Anne asked.



The number was only about ten percent more than the house without it.

"Get us twenty-thousand off the asking price, take Anne's color and carpet and cabinet order, and you've made a sale!" Damon told her.

Several days of dickering came and went with the owner of the company building the neighborhood eventually asking to meet with them.

He attempted to convince them that there was no room to wheel and deal, especially given the lot size. He tried to appeal to Anne's sense of, "You know it's right for you, so why ruin a possible deal by haggling?"

Anne, whom he evidently mistook for an air-headed young woman, looked into his eyes and said, "Fine. Then if you won't take the twenty off the top, let's talk upgraded carpets, solid surface counters in the kitchen and all the bathrooms, an allowance for landscaping all that extra lot we are taking off your hands so you don't have to pay to fully landscape it, and perhaps you picking up the closing costs. Well?"

The man had stared at her and then laughed. "Not your first rodeo, huh?"

"No. My second, but I hold several advanced degrees including a doctorate and watch many of those home improvement and 'Your First Property' programs. Plus," she now lied, "I have a relative in the business and he tells me that you are making a bundle on these homes because you got the land for pennies on the dollar. So?"

He sighed as Damon looked away. "Okay. Fifteen off the top, your countertops, carpets upgraded and we split closing costs."

Anne smiled at him and reached out to shake his hand.

"Mr. Dalloway, we seem to have a deal."



## CHAPTER IX

### A NEW HOME AND A LITTLE BOREDOM

FIFTY-SEVEN days later Damon, Anne, Tommy and Sandy Swift moved into their beautiful new home. Tommy and Sandy had their own rooms—unlike their shared one at the small, temporary house—along with a large master bedroom suite for Anne and Damon, plus there was a fourth bedroom for guests and a large den off the living room downstairs.

What neither Anne nor Damon realized that the house also had a full basement that had been completely finished around the perimeter and was only waiting for them to decide how they wished to subdivide it. Other than, to Anne's delight, the fully enclosed and *lockable* furnace and water heater room and a half-bathroom in the corner under the kitchen.

When the first anniversary of Damon's taking charge of the company came, Anne decided it was high time to recognize everyone's hard work and dedication, and so she talked him into spending a little of the company's profits in putting on a party.

"I'll organize things and run all costs past you, dear," she promised.

The announcement was made that the following Friday afternoon, starting at three o'clock, it would be "tools down" and "party on" for the nearly seventy employees. As the loud speakers died down, a roar of appreciation came from each of the three main construction buildings as well as the warehouse and even from out in the lobby of the business offices.

That, mostly from the company secretary.

As Anne planned, bought and arranged—with several of the wives she had been making friends with over their time in Shopton—Damon was wrestling with a new problem.

One of the men hired on a month earlier had been caught stealing a few small items. Nothing very costly and certainly nothing that could not be replaced, but all were items from a secret project the company had taken on from the United States

Navy.

After turning the man into the local police—and being read a fairly standard, "You really ought to run that company of yours more like a big business, Mr. Swift, and get yourself something more than a night watchman!"—Damon had gone to talk with George Dilling.

"Bad situation, Damon," he had said. "But, I may have a small idea. See, I have a cousin who knows a man who... well, you get the drift. The upshot is that a very nice and competent young Secret Service man, he's the one who took that bullet meant for the Vice President last year, is having to retire from that service. Bullet nicked his heart and so he has a weakness in the outer wall that won't let him pass their physical."

"I recall all the coverage," Damon told him. "I'd guess he's a year or so older than me, but I don't mind hiring good, ancient men." He smiled at George both of them knowing that George was at least three years Damon's senior. "Have your friends' cousin's, neighbor's pen pal call with some contact information."

Two days later Damon was on the phone.

"This is Harlan Ames speaking. Who's calling, please?"

"This is Damon Swift of the Swift Company in Shopton, New York. I hear through a rather obscure grapevine that you might be on the lookout for employment."

"Ahh. Did this grapevine mention that I am, according the Secret Service policy, a near invalid with no value to the organization?"

Damon laughed. "Yeah. Something like that. Listen, I'm not certain what sort of action you're looking for, but I need a top-notch man who understands security. With a capital S. I can't say you would be off on daily adventures up here. The same thing goes for jogging along side my sedan checking out the crowd. What I can offer you is absolute control over keeping the employees safe as well as ferreting out the bad ones, keeping my company secure, and helping us to grow."

Ames said he would drive up in a few days.

"Plan on staying at my house a couple days. Shopton isn't

exactly rife with hotels and motels... yet. Also, I'd like to have you here as our guest on Friday when we are holding a company-wide picnic and celebration. It'll give you a chance to see everyone and also them to see you."

Wednesday evening Anne reported that all was in readiness. "I'm bringing four large sheet cakes and everything else is coming from two restaurants in town."

"Oh. That explains those big shiny aluminum pans in the kitchen. Great." He reminded her about the arrival of their guest. "He will be coming straight to the plant tomorrow afternoon and I'll give him a little tour then slip out early."

When Anne finally met Harlan Ames he was just about nothing like she had imagined. Tall, certainly, and muscularly built, but he reminded her more of a businessman than someone once paid to protect the nation's second top politician.

For his part, Harlan took an immediate liking to both Damon and Anne. He always preferred intelligent people with a solid sense of who they were over wishy-washy individuals who only get to where they are by luck or family ties.

As they sat eating, Tommy kept asking questions about how many people he'd shot and what sort of gun he carried and could he see the gun.

"Well, young Tom," Harlan told him, "for starters I never liked carrying a gun. I only ever took it out in the line of duty, and even then I would spend days wondering if I had done the right thing. Oh, and I've never killed anyone."

"Tommy," his father said getting the young boy's attention, "I also do not believe in the use of weapons except when absolutely necessary. I would like very much if you stop talking about guns with our guest."

"Nuts!" Tommy said, but his face brightened when he asked, "Have you ever ridden in a jet plane? I have. All the way from Florida where we used to live and to Albu— uhh Albunny."

"Well, the first answer is yes. Several times but never when I was as young as you are, Tommy. You, too, Sandy. And, I believe the city you were trying to say is called All-bah-nee."

The company party went well with everyone having a great time. Harlan spent some time with Damon, some with Anne and some just wandering around saying hello to various employees. Because there were a few other invited guests nobody thought anything of him being there.

That night he and Damon went into the den next to the living room and spoke about Ames' feeling about coming to work.

"For three very good reasons I want to come work for you, Damon. First, everything I read about this place and about you and Anne, and yes, I did a lot of research, tells me you are the very best sort of people to know and to work for. Secondly, I need a change of pace. D.C. is not going to be my home anymore no matter whether you hire me or not. But thirdly, your Swift Company is going to grow and grow and grow under your leadership. You know it and I know it. You need me as much as I need this."

They shook on it and Harlan Ames became a Swift employee.

Harlan moved his young wife to Shopton a week later where they settled down in the very same small house the Swifts had lived in for several months. The size suited them very well.

Anne had recently been feeling a little out of sorts. She missed her daily work life in Florida more than she would ever admit, but her extra time let her start her children's education early.

Tommy took to learning quickly. His mind seemed like a sponge ready to soak up anything, but especially anything having to do with mechanical things and science things. Within weeks he could tell you, in fairly precise detail, what the first ten elements on the Periodic Table were and what the reaction between common vinegar and baking soda was. A neighbor had a son a little older who had a chemistry set, and he gave Tommy one of his extra test tubes.

Tommy loved to take people outside and show them how powerful the reaction was by filling the tube half full of the liquid, dropping in a square of toilet paper with a teaspoon of baking soda twisted inside down into the tube and covering it with his thumb.

Although she had to greatly simplify things, Anne was in her element with telling him about biology and tiny little creatures that could only be seen under a microscope. That, of course, led to a promise of him getting one for Christmas.

Sandy, on the other hand, was generally uninterested in sitting still long enough to be taught, so Anne began slipping teaching events into her daily life. She started by softly singing the A, B, C song when they were driving.

A few weeks later she nearly had to pull over when Sandy finished the letters from Q all the way to the end by herself when Anne paused.

It was tricky stuff, but Sandy learned new things in spite of herself.

At the time she turned five she was counting up to thirty with no mistakes and knew the alphabet from any starting point except for an odd "blind spot" if the initial letter was R.

Anne was also spending some time with Harlan's wife, Olivia. They were becoming friends, and so were Harlan and Damon and even Harlan and Anne.

He became her sounding board on several occasions when she just didn't think it would be appropriate to ask her husband.

Within a few months he got them on the subject of her former work life.

"I've been told by Damon that you were somewhat of a bio-genius, Anne. Why did you give it up? And, what's this about you coming up with a world-famous cancer cure?"

"Well, the cancer one was a fluke that no high school girl should ever be part of. Don't get me wrong, because I loved every second of it. It's just that my whole early life, at least at the girls' school and even in college a bit was narrowly focussed. I never did much study in, for example, geography or philosophy. Sometimes I wish that I had. Or, that Shopton had a really good community college I might go teach at while also taking some fun classes myself."

"I bet you miss the microbiology stuff, though," he suggested. "That has to be a field changing so fast that all your hard work

might be too far behind the times if you don't get back into it. Not around here, for sure, but— well, I guess there's nothing in Shopton to help with that."

Things had stayed at that point for a long time.

The summer came and Tommy was going to start first grade in September. Sandy who had been difficult about pre-school seemed to be looking forward to kindergarten.

Anne figured out why.

It seemed that young Sandra Helene Swift was jealous of her brother. She caught Sandy having a serious talk with her grandfather one afternoon.

"If Tommy gonna be at school, Saneer not gonna see him, gramp. Saneer loves Tommy and I wanna go the school."

Anne allowed George to try to correct her use of "Saneer" because the girl was eventually going to have to pronounce it correctly.

"What's your name, my little darling?" George Swift asked gently.

"It is Sandra Helene Swift, but mommy laughs when I call me 'Saneer,' " she told him with a serious face.

"And," Anne said stepping into the room, to her daughter's surprise, "your mommy is very proud of you when you say your name the right way, Sandra."

Sandy rolled her eyes, something she had seen Anne do on occasion. "Okay, mother," she said in a low, almost dramatic tone. "Sandra, Sandra, Sandra."

"I'll make you a deal," Anne told her as she picked the girl off her grandfather's lap. "You call me 'mommy' or even 'mom' and I'll call you Sandy. Is it a deal?"

"Mother, mother, mother, Sandra, Sandra, Sandra," the girl chanted.

"Parent one, offspring five I think," George said as he got up. He kissed the girl on the cheek, did the same to Anne, and walked them to the front door.

The final week of August arrived and Anne and Damon



invited Harlan and Olivia Ames to dinner. Grandpa George had both children for the evening so the adults could talk about anything.

Olivia was telling them about her new job with a law firm. "Now, I have to admit working with the Congressman from Oregon for a few years was a bit more on the exciting side, but I've missed working terribly these past few months so I'm actually looking forward to becoming the executive Secretary for Stormtrooper, Kong, and Tinkle."

"She means Fromehauser, Kline and Trimble," Harlan told them.

"More accurate, dear but less funny," she said giving his hand a squeeze. "At least Anne has the kids to keep her from going stir crazy."

The other three looked at Anne. She shrugged and tried to give them a smile, but the truth was that she *was* going a little crazy being at home with Tommy and Sandy except the five hours they had been going to kindergarten and preschool.

Damon noticed the look. "What's the matter, Anne?"

"It's really nothing, but with the kids now getting ready to be at school from nine until about three each weekday, I'm going to be rattling around the house. Maybe I'll take up interior design and figure out what to do with that basement of ours!"

The subject changed to a few new things happening at the company, but Harlan kept looking toward Anne. There was something in the back of his mind that had been there since first meeting the exceptional woman.

Now, to discover that she might be open to working outside the home, his brain was engaging and several names came to it. He would need to remember to make a few calls on Monday.

As the couple left an hour later, Damon took his wife in his arms and hugged her.

"I sense that the idea of you being all alone during the day is not one particularly appealing to you, huh? Want a dog?"

She shrugged. "Not sure. I do miss the lab work but not anything to do with going out on detective work. That ship has sailed and is far over the horizon. I hope it falls off the edge of

the Earth!" She laughed. "You know, I think part of this is a little jealousy at how well you have done pulling the Swift Company out of the furnace and gotten it back on its feet. I wish I could accomplish something."

"And, raising our two wonderful and well behaved—one—and pouty princess—the other one—isn't enough?"

"Tommy is practically raising himself. H's going to be one of life's go-getters, Damon, mark my words. By the time he is twenty-one you'd better be looking over your shoulder or he'll take over the company and head to the stars!"

As they cleaned up the table and got dishes into the washer, he stopped and said, "I just realized that as you were praising our son, you said nothing about the other side of our offspring coin. Troubles?"

With a small snort, Anne replied, "Sandra is now and will probably always be a handful. She knows what she wants and is headstrong enough to be demanding. Plus, she is an attention hog. I love her and am doing my best, but I almost pity the boy who she latches onto someday." She stopped and set the dishrag on the counter. "Would you mind if I found a part time job? I'm not sure what's up for grabs around here, but I think I need something to keep my mind in gear. You know?"

He took her back into his arms and nodded. "Yes. I do know. And, I'll support you on any decision you make. Even if it means getting some afternoon help with the kids if all you can find is a full-time position."

Anne went to sleep that night with a smile on her face. She knew her husband wanted what she wanted and was immensely glad that he let her know about it.

The next morning as they got out of bed, he noticed the smile was still there.

"Good dreams?"

She nodded. "Yep. All about the most amazing man I married and am living with happily ever after!"

## CHAPTER X

### HARLAN COMES A-CALLING, AMONG OTHERS

WHEN ANNE returned home after dropping Tommy and Sandy off at their respective daytime learning centers three weeks into the school year, she considered stopping to do some shopping on the way home. But, she hadn't had a very good night, sleep wise, so she headed home.

Walking in through the kitchen's side door to the garage, she looked longingly at the coffee maker. She had made a nice pot for breakfast before finding out Damon had to rush off to the company to take care of another in a long string of little emergencies.

She sighed as she poured herself a tepid cup. Then, looking askance at the small container, she poured it into a much larger mug, added more coffee from the pot, and put the mug into the microwave oven. A minute later it came out with little, satisfying wisps of steam drifting up from the surface.

She had taken her first and second sips and was going in for the third when the phone rang. Anne sighed again, set the mug on the counter and stretched over to take the receiver off the phone on the wall.

"Hello," she said. "This is the Swift residence."

"Hello, Anne. It's Harlan Ames down at the company."

"Oh. Hello, Mr. Harlan Ames. Damon already is at work, but \_"

"No. It's you I wanted to speak to, and please drop the mister stuff. Even in formal situations you know I'm just plain Harlan. Anyway, I know that you don't have a lot to keep you busy these days, and you've not been successful in your search these past few weeks. I called because I want to talk to you about a little part time work I know about. It's right up your alley."

She sat up straight. Her curiosity overrode her desire to hang up, pour a nice, hot bath and crawl in until it was time to pick the kids up.

"What sort of work?"

He chuckled. "Well, there's the little problem. I can't tell you over the phone. What I can say is that this is a legitimate job that both I and the person who wants to meet you believe is perfect for you. Almost as if your entire life has been leading to it. It won't even interfere with your duties at home. I mean, with the kids and all that. So..."

"Listen, Harlan. It's nice of you to offer but my life is... was that of a scientist. The thought of doing inane things like being a saleswoman or delivering telephone directories door-to-door just isn't my idea of fun."

"Well then, let me try this approach; it includes working with microscopes."

There was complete silence for about fifteen seconds before Anne repeated, "Microscopes?"

"Microscopes and much more. Can you spare, oh, about thirty minutes this morning? We can meet for a coffee at the diner over on Fifth and Madison. I'll buy."

Anne discovered that she was biting her lower lip rather harder than was comfortable so she stopped and rubbed it with her knuckle.

"I'm not committing myself to anything by accepting a simple cup of coffee, am I?"

"No, and if you absolutely hate the idea I'll let you buy your own coffee, but I believe you will see this as an excellent opportunity to do something useful, and make a little money in the process. I know that Damon isn't taking very much of a salary these days while he gets us all back to full running order. It might help the household finances a bit."

It was true. The household funds were still running very tight. So much that, as she looked down at her mug, she realized she had to make a single pot of coffee last the entire day.

And, she hated rewarmed coffee!

"All right. I have to run a brush through my hair first, but I can be there in, oh, say twenty minutes?"

"That will be wonderful, Anne. And, thanks for agreeing to come."

The phone clicked and the dial tone came back. She hung up.

Without knowing what this might really be about she wasn't certain if she ought to change into a dress. Slacks and a pullover shirt might not make a good impression so she quickly ran upstairs, taking her clothes off as she walked down the hall to the bedroom and went to the closet.

She pulled out a knee-length summer dress that was demure enough if the other person who wanted to see her was a woman, yet showed just enough leg if it were a man.

Lipstick, or lip gloss?

She grabbed a tube of gloss and applied it to her lips. Shiny but not showy. The brush brought her lustrous blonde hair into a manageable style and she smiled at herself.

The drive downtown took just a few minutes. Shopton, after all, wasn't a major metropolitan area and you could get from the outskirts on one side to the outskirts on the other in under seven minutes, including hitting a few of the seven traffic lights.

Anne sat in her car for a minute once she arrived and parked. Her heart was beating and she was a little nervous.

*Damn, damn, damn, she thought. Why didn't I put on antiperspirant? Poo!*

After taking a deep breath she got out and walked the fifty feet to the front door of the diner. It was one of the style from after the war build to look like an enlarged dining car from a train. It even had wheels, but they were made from wood and the paint was peeling and the wood warping with age.

Inside she immediately spotted Harlan sitting with another man, somewhat smaller, with short, black hair. Where Harlan could be mistaken for any sort of businessman, this other gentleman looked like someone from a governmental agency of some sort.

She put a slight smile on her lips and walked over to them.

Both men rose with Harlan greeting her with a smile and the

other man a curt nod and one-pump handshake.

"Anne Swift, this is Quimby Narz. He is the man I told you so very little about on the phone."

She nodded at the man. "Hello. He actually told me practically nothing. I hope you will change that quickly."

"Hello, Mrs. Swift. I won't presume to call you Anne. As Mr. Ames here said, my name is Quimby Narz. Now, I feel I must tell you that this is not my real name. You will understand why in a moment." They all sat.

Anne glanced at Harlan for some sign that this was not some sort of trick. He gave her a reassuring nod.

"The reason for the... the, well, let us just call it my code name, is that I am an agent with the Federal Bureau of Investigation. As such we typically use our actual names, but because of the nature of what I am involved in it has been deemed necessary to use alternate identities."

"Harlan? What is he talking about, and why doesn't he get to the point? I refuse to get into being a spy or something like that!"

"Mrs. Swift. I'm sorry but I thought it necessary to explain—"

"What? Explain to the poor little woman who couldn't possibly understand? What do you take me for? Some air-headed semi-moron?"

Narz sat looking slightly stunned. "Well, no. Actually I know you to be a woman... check that. You are an *individual* of a very high intellect, capable of, at the age of eighteen, helping to create a cure for a particularly insidious type of cancer, and one that my own aunt was saved from as a result of your work."

Now, Anne was slightly stunned. "Oh. You know about that, huh?"

Agent Narz smiled. "My dear, dear Mrs. Anne Douglas Swift, you are the culmination of things legends are created to carry words of praise about. I don't want this to sound like spy stuff, but we have kept an eye on your education, your work at the blood research facility in Florida, and now even as you have become a stay at home mother. Haven't you ever wished you

could put your extensive knowledge in, let me see..." he turned over a paper sitting on the table to his right. "Ah, yes. Undergraduate degree in Biology, plus a simultaneous honors school degree in Microbiology, then onto graduate school where you garnered your Doctorate in Molecular Biology."

Her eyes narrowing in suspicion, Anne backed her chair away from the table about a foot.

"I am not certain where this is going, but I am certain that I do not want to become an FBI agent. Thank you very much!"

"What *do* you want?" Narz asked pointedly.

She had been in the process of standing, but now Anne sat down, placing both palms down onto the table top.

Narz repeated his question. "What is it that you do want?"

She put on a sweet smile she did not feel. "I will tell you what I want, Agent I-can't-tell-you-anything. I want to go home right now. If circumstances were different I would want to work in a little laboratory, perhaps even a small trailer lab like back in my high school days. I would have a nice microscope and a centrifuge and retorts and test tubes and an incubator and a few other bits and bobs. What I would not have is some title bestowed on me that I didn't wish to have. Agent Anne does not suit me nor will I ever allow anyone to call me that."

"Microscope?" he asked somewhat incredulously almost as if he had stopped listening half way through her last statement. "Something along the lines of a Leica... erm..." he looked at the sheet again, now reading, "ah, a Leica DM6000? And, that just for starters?"

Anne found that her desire to leave had just diminished.

"A real DM6000?"

"With everything that can be had to go with it."

She made a decision. "Okay, Agent Quimby, give me the whole spiel. Or as much as you can cram into ten minutes." She crossed her arms under her breast and gave them a slight push up. Usually that had the effect on men of making it difficult for them to form complete sentences.

It was a move totally lost on the FBI man who was currently looking down at and through his briefcase on the floor. When he came back up he was holding a list. He handed it to Anne.

"Uh, do you meant to tell me that you have all this?" she asked, her skepticism evident as she read.

"Truthfully, no. Not today, or all in one place. What we have is that list representing our best guess at what might be required for what we intend. We have an expet guiding us."

She nodded, looked to Harlan to see if he could give her anything more, and nodded again.

"I see." She set the list back on the table and slid it toward Narz. "Great list for doing simple blood tests. So, mister Agent Quimby, why ask me to be part of a blood center? Surely not because I did that in Florida, and there can't be that much blood work to be done in all of upstate New York, much less little Shopton."

"It is so much more, Mrs. Swift. It is a lab to be designed to handle things no simple blood test center ever could." He leaned across the table so he could lower his voice. "What we want to set up is a lab to handle the sort of cases that fall under the heading of life and death. Plagues, imuno-viral outbreaks, bio-terrorism... the works!" His smile told her that he hoped that was sufficient reason for her to jump at the opportunity.

"No." She calmly picked up her coffee mug looking over it at the agent.

Silence followed for half a minute as Anne sipped her coffee.

Finally, Harlan spoke. "You absolutely don't want to have anything to do with something this exciting, Anne? Everything I know about you tells me this is the next great step in what you had been doing right up to the day you and Damon and the kids moved to Shopton."

She reached over to place her right hand on his left one. "Harlan, there are a long list of things that are important to me. My husband and kids top that list. How could you be part of anything asking me to give that up? Or place them in any sort of danger?" She was angry and confused.



"Anne, this isn't something I suggested you for with anything but the utmost forethought. It also isn't something that would drag you away from your family for more than a few weeks at a time, perhaps only three or four times a year. Isn't that correct, Agent Narz?"

Quimby nodded. "That is correct. We have another lab set up out in Idaho. They only see four or five cases per year, at least this first year in their existence. Four scientist doctors with various specialties share responsibilities. If one isn't needed for a particular case, he or she is not contacted. They are never called unless their specialty is required. Simple as that."

"All right. Listen while I try to put this in simple words. I nearly put the worlds of microbiology and molecular biology behind me more than six years ago. I got pregnant and even gave up the blood center work for fear of contracting some bloodborne disease. Or, I gave it up for a couple months. I went back and other than an unfortunate piece of field work, I was happy. Then, the move came and I was still happy. I want some sort of work, but this sounds like a series of cases with a high level of danger; danger on steroids. Yes, I must admit that it would be nice to have some extra income until my husband's company gets back on its feet, but for gosh sake, the risks could never be mitigated to the degree where anyone working in such a place would be absolutely safe. So, no. The answer is no. I will spell that. N-O. As in a negative response. A refusal. Thank you for the coffee, but my answer is and will remain, no."

She rose, motioned for them to remain seated, and added a few additional words to ensure he understood how serious she was being in her refusal before she left.

A few of them made a nearby waitress blush.

"Do you think we will get her?" Quimby Narz asked leaning back and scratching his nose.

Harlan watched through the diner windows as Anne got into her car and headed down the street.

"I don't know, Doug. Sorry, I mean *Quimby*."

As she drove toward her neighborhood, Anne Swift had to admit that the offer would have been interesting had it not been for the kids and Damon. She had been itching to do something with her education ever since moving to Shopton; she had been missing the old blood research center.

But, it was not to be. At least not for years and years. Even then, what in the world would Damon say? He'd probably seem to be all in favor or it until the realization of the dangers involved hit him. Then, he would possibly take that anger out on his Security man and fire him for even suggesting she take part in such an operation.

Anne did not want to be responsible for getting Harlan Ames fired so she decided to never mention the meeting. Ever.

That afternoon Anne arrived home from picking Tommy up from first grade and Sandy from the kindergarten center. All the way home, both sat in their car seats sticking their tongues out at each other. Twice Sandy had tattled on Tommy as he crossed his eyes at her and whispered something to which she evidently took exception.

Sandy even created an imaginary line that she squealed about whenever her brother dared to move his hand past.

Finally, at one of the town's few stoplights, Anne turned around and glared at the two of them. Silence reigned all the way home. That lasted until she turned the car off in their driveway.

As if the morning's meeting with her husband's Chief of Security and the FBI man hadn't been enough for her to consider, now her two prides and joys were determined to act up with no end of their antics in sight.

She took them to the living room, sat them both on the floor and explained their options.

"You two can either sit and play, quietly, by yourselves while I unpack the groceries and start your dinner, or I can take you to your rooms and there you will stay until your father gets home. What do you want?"

Tommy looked up at her and smiled. "I love you Momsie," he said. Lately he had been calling her that instead of "mommy." Truth be told, she liked it.

"I love you, too, Tommy. You are my favorite son of all times!"

Sandy, not yet understanding gender differences—even though she had asked why daddy had a sticky out thing and she did not—squealed.

"I wanna be your fave-rut son, Mommy!"

Anne smiled and rolled her eyes, something her little girl did right back at her.

"Fine. You two stay out here and no screaming or fighting. Tommy? I'm leaving you in charge."

"I wanna be a charge, Mommy!" Sandy declared.

"No, Sandy. You just stay and be mommy's bestest girl. Okay?"

Sandy nodded, but it was clear from her expression than she didn't believe she was getting a good deal. "Sanny besterst, Mommy."

In the kitchen, Anne poured the last of the morning's coffee into a mug, added some milk and put it in the microwave to heat up. She had just taken her first, rather unpleasant, sip when the phone rang.

Picking it up she said, "Hello. Swift residence, mother of two speaking. What can I do for you?"

"Is this Mrs. Anne Douglass Swift?" the woman at the other end inquired. It was a professional voice sounding of years of business phone calls and zero chit chat.

"Yes, it is," she replied slowly. "Who are you?"

"I am Mrs. Margaret White, executive secretary to the President of the United States. He wishes to speak with you."

Anne smelled a rat. Coming so soon after her telling Harlan and that FBI man she was not interested, this certainly seemed to be a put on.

"Well," she replied, "please tell his nibs that it is nice and all that, but we already subscribe to Reader's Digest or whatever else he is trying to sell. Goodbye!" With that, she hung up.

The phone rang five seconds later.

"Mrs. Swift. Do not hang up on me again. I assure you that the President wishes to talk with you and will do that whether you stay there while I connect you, or he has to have the Secret Service come to your residence there in Shopton and bring you down to Washington. It is your choice, but I would suggest you hold." There was a click and she was treated to fifteen seconds of The Washington Post March.

"Mrs. Anne Swift?" the deep voice asked. It was a voice that had been on the news for nearly two years before the election, and in the year after that courtesy of his weekly address to the nation.

It was a voice so unique in tone and timbre that no impressionist could do it service.

It was a voice that sent an icy shiver down Anne's back.

"Oh, my god!" she said. "It is you!"

"Why, yes, ma'am, it is. I trust that you understand the reason for this phone call?"

She asked if it had to do with the FBI request.

He told he it did.

"I am so sorry, Mr. President," she said, "but I am just a young wife who has put all the microbiology stuff behind me in favor of raising my two children. You have three of your own, sir. Can you understand that I would not wish to work with anything that might sicken me or any member of my family?"

"Of course I can. The thing is that the Government has known about you and your exceptional talents in your field since you were a teenage girl. At that school in New York. I have a list of your achievements including your Academy of Science award, your outstanding educational achievements, and all the rest. You are a wonderful scientist and a treasure we had hoped to mine some day."

Anne took a deep breath. "Sir? While I appreciate the compliments I really can't consider picking up and coming down there. My life, my husband and my family are here in Shopton. So, with as much appreciating as I can possibly muster, and a personal thank you for your call, I must tell you what I told Agent Narz. Thank you but no thank you."

There was a deep chuckling from the other end. "That isn't exactly how you worded it with that FBI man, though. I hear you used some rather stronger words."

Anne felt the blood drain from her face.

"Oh, my! He didn't report that to you, did he?"

"I'm afraid so. And, I'm afraid I have no more time to talk. Please reconsider. Neither the FBI man nor I can tell you what is at stake, but just know that the lives of others rest in hands such as yours. How many, I don't know. A dozen? Thousands? Millions? Oh, and the work would be right there in your home town. Well, good day to you, Mrs. Swift."

The line went dead and Anne had to sit down and catch the breath she had practically been holding during the entire conversation.



## CHAPTER XI

### GOING FOR IT!

"YOU AMUSED the President," Harlan informed her as they sat having coffee the following mid-morning. "The word I get from Narz is that he received a call ten minutes after yours and was informed that you made a very positive impression on the man in the White House."

Anne slumped a little, "That is the last thing I wanted to do. Damn it, I wanted him to know that I am not going to become an FBI agent, Harlan. Can't even you see that?"

Harlan nodded. "There is one small, but probably significant difference in the Anne Swift version of all this and the official one. Absolutely nobody is or ever will mention the word 'agent' in conjunction with the job, Anne. My guess is you will be supplied a false identity should you ever need to come in contact with anybody outside the secret circle, but your title within the Agency would just be Doctor Swift."

She rubbed a spot on her forehead between her eyes where a small pain had been building for the past hour. Oh, how she had wanted to tell Damon about this—and talk to him about the fact that she was secretly a little thrilled and certainly honored to be considered for what seemed a vitally important job—and have him reassure her that everything would be okay whether she took the job or did not.

But, she knew that he was not to be allowed to know. Not today and not ever. No one was. The position needed to be an absolute deep secret except for the FBI and Harlan Ames. Harlan.....? She looked into his yes.

"Why do you know about this, Harlan?"

"By 'this' do you mean just the calls or the entire thing?"

"Everything. Level with me?"

Now, her coffee companion looked like a man about to decide whether to lie to her, refuse to answer, or tell the truth.

"What do you want, Anne? Truth, half-truth or outright falsehood?"

There was a sudden clearing in Anne's brain. Something of great import hit her. She shifted in her seat. She understood his uncomfortable position in this chain of events.

"What I want is the absolute truth, Harlan, but any half-truth that allows us to keep a friendship will do. Just no lies, please."

"Fine. I believe I need to tell you all three, but same as with the job offer, this goes no farther than the edges of this table."

He proceeded to tell her of how, as he was in lying the hospital in Washington D.C. recuperating from his gunshot wound, he had been approached by another FBI agent. The woman had told him about Anne and suggested that he move to the area and keep tabs on her until such time as it might be arranged to lure her into the job.

"Lure? Not ask nicely?"

"Her words, Anne. Not mine and never my intention."

Harlan had refused the suggestion and things had escalated. The woman tried to seduce him in the mistaken belief that he was susceptible to that sort of thing. That the prolonged hospitalization would have weakened his resolve.

"For crying out loud, Anne, she was promising me a whole raft of incredibly intriguing things not realizing I was married and didn't need any of them. She got yanked from Project Harlan within minutes of my ratting her out to a good buddy in the agency. I didn't get so much as 'see ya later' from her."

He told her that his coming to the attention of Damon was a fluke of good luck.

"I never considered how it might mean I would get to know you, but I did. I have found the home with the Swift Company I think I always wanted and needed and would hate for this to ruin my chances of staying with the company."

"Okay. Assuming I believe this, why *did* you get involved? And, at what point?"

He hung his head a little.



"I gave into political pressure and the love of my life, my wife. I got promised that she would find employment at that law office at an incredible salary for the work she is now doing if I would meet with Agent Narz and discuss you. And help him get to meet you. I have and will continue to place no pressure on you whatsoever, Anne. That's his bag. Oh, and it turns out I've known the man who would be Quimby Narz for about ten years. He's a decent enough man and won't screw you over, if that helps."

"So, that is the truth of it all?" she inquired. After he nodded she asked, "What would the lie have been?"

"Probably that I was being forced into recruiting you in return for no charges being filed against me over the Vice President's shooting. The hard noses at the Secret Service were supposed to be ready to file Dereliction of Duty charges against me because the would-be assassin was standing in my line of sight and I did not fire, that they would drag me out of Shopton and straight to prison if I didn't help the FBI get you."

He looked at her a moment and then they both broke out laughing.

"That's pretty absurd, Harlan," she told him. He couldn't disagree.

Before they left ten minutes later he told her, "Anne, you do what you want and feel is right. I'll probably be the go-between to keep Narz out of more public appearances, and I will have to faithfully tell you what they say and then relate your responses. If it gets to be a real burden to you this next year or so, then tell me and I'll put an end to it if I am at all able to do so."

She left the table after dropping a five-dollar bill on it. "Coffee's on me today," she said as she walked to the front door.

All the way to her car a block away she considered what the Swift Company Security man had said. It all pointed to the fact that none of this was spur of the moment, that words to the effect of her being watched for a great many years all pointing to this job had been spoken. *How far back*, she wondered.

A chill shiver ran down her spine as she thought over the possibility that at this very minutes someone might be tailing or

at least watching her. She spun quickly around but there was nobody there. No one was ducking hurriedly into a doorway to avoid her seeing them. No mystery car was parked close by with one or more men in it hidden behind newspapers. The same thing went for there being no car slowly cruising in her direction.

By the time Anne got back to the house she had gone through curiosity, anger, an eerie feeling, more curiosity, more anger, and finally a physical and emotional shrug.

It was what it was. A job offer, and one with certainly the oddest circumstances of background checking, but it was a job offer. An intriguing offer to say the least.

She still wished she could confide in Damon, but she realized that would ruin his relationship with his Security man.

The Swift Company was about to undergo one of three name changes in the next nine years. The first of September had brought in the most lucrative contract since Damon's return to supply a new type of flight control system for the airline industry.

Where joysticks and cables had given way to steering-wheel-like yokes and cables, then shedding the cables in favor of hydraulics, several incidents where structural failures led to hydraulic lines being severed resulting more often than not in catastrophic crashes, a new system of using electronic signals traveling down data cables had taken over for many years.

But, like their oil-filled predecessors, at least five jetliners had recently gone down with all aboard perishing when those data cables, and even their back-ups, had failed or been damaged.

One Swift engineer, Ollie Golite—nicknamed Holly Go-lightly by some Audrey Hepburn fans—came up with a new way.

"Damon, we all use compressed band radio waves today, even in some of the newer cell phones, so why not use it in aircraft? I have a friend who is working on a new standard signal type capable of transferring more data per millisecond than anything before it. And it has more than enough range without being interfered with by anything else."

Damon had insisted the man apply for a patent and had their own attorney assist with it.

That had been within a few months of Damon coming back and taking command. Now, nearly fifteen months later the patent was approved and awarded, and Ollie and Damon had developed the plans for implementing the system for aircraft of nearly any size.

Starting in June a small aircraft manufacturer who had been required by the FAA to make significant improvements in their flight controls due to several mishaps, had jumped on board. It would not just solve the problems with cables that could jam, it also would reduce weight by about four hundred pounds giving their 2- and 4-seaters an advantage over the competition.

But it had been the huge B-D-A Corporation and their near stranglehold on the mid-range and transcontinental aircraft market that came to them in August requesting a multi-year contract to provide thousands of the new system for both new and refit purposes.

And so, Damon announced that come October 15th, the name would be changing to Swift AeroElectronics Corporation. Nearly everyone felt it was more in keeping with their actual output and not easily confused with being a company that might be hired to erect a new house or office building.

Damon was enthusiastic and so was Anne. When her husband and kids were pleased, so was she. For them and for herself.

But, as she lay next to Damon the night after the renaming party, Anne Douglas Swift's mind raced to and fro over about twenty different things that had been building up over the past several weeks.

Among them was Sandy's apparent refusal to "play nicely" with the other children at Kindergarten. It wasn't that the girl was mean or possessive of the various toys, it was that she marched around telling other girls that they weren't as pretty as she was and she would not talk to ugly children.

The teacher had explained to Anne that she saw at least one such child, almost always girls, like this every year, but that

small, corrective talks and rechanneling usually worked. With Sandy all her attempts had been met with nods of acknowledgement and then the girl went right back to the same behavior.

Anne also was worrying about her son. Tommy hit the first grade like a rocket and raced ahead of the others. She knew he had better than average reading skills, but his dismayed teacher had called her to explain that he was reading at a third grade level and the school would not provide her with those more advanced materials. She had begged Anne to let her send a list of books Tommy might either buy or check out from the Public Library that she could use with him.

The same problem was arising with the very simple math being taught. Where some of the children struggled with  $2+2=$  problems, Tommy was asking why they were not using two or three number combinations. Or, learning how to multiply and divide. He had entered school knowing his times tables for numbers 2 up through 9, something his school held back until early third grade.

Foremost in her thoughts was the FBI job and what it would mean if she never took it. Or, what it might mean if she did.

How in the world could she juggle the house and children and Damon and still manage to accomplish anything? The commute time to any reasonable lab would kill half of her available time during the week and she couldn't imagine having any time on weekends that could be explained by, "Mommy's going to take a six-hour drive so you be good!"

The following morning she was startled when the phone rang at exactly nine. It was from the Florida blood research facility.

"Hey, Anne. It's Marc Stein. We miss you horribly down here but I'll just bet you're having a heck of a fine time. So, how are things? I read in the papers about the success Damon is having with the company."

"Well hello, Marc. You sound rather chipper for it being Friday morning and about the time you normally drag yourself into the office for coffee number three or four."

"Yeah. Things are really busy down here. You've probably not

read a lot about it, but Tennessee has an outbreak of a new strain of what looks like measles, but is a lot worse. Seventeen deaths so far; all in children under eight." He sounded very discouraged about that last part.

"Oh, my. I'm so sorry to hear that, Marc. I imagine the team is being run off its feet over this. And, as much as I'd like to pretend to be just another dumb blonde mother in her late twenties, I think I can guess why you called. Not a social one, huh?"

"No," he admitted and she could picture the embarrassed grin he would have on his face right now. "I'm hoping like the devil to talk you into coming down to help. We have several microbiologists we call in but nobody with your molecular level of understanding. All we can come up with is, 'It is different.' I know you were happy to leave this particular lab rat race behind, but we're in over our heads, and there really is nowhere else to turn."

"Give me a moment here, Marc. I need to think. I'm going to set the receiver down but just so I can take a little walk outside to think. Hold for me about five minutes?"

"Anything, Anne."

She placed the receiver on the counter and picked up her cell phone before stepping outside to the back yard. Looking at the quickly dying flowers and vegetables in her little garden made her feel sad. She walked a bit and looked at the device in her hand. Flipping it open a minute later she dialed Damon's work number.

"Damon Swift," he answered.

She began telling him about the outbreak in the South but broke down and began to sob. She had to squat down on her heels and take deep breaths to get back her composure.

"It is just so maddeningly sad, Damon. There ought to be plenty of people who could lend a hand and yet Marc makes it sound like I'm their only hope. I don't know what to do?"

The last thing she expected was to hear her husband chuckling into his phone. "Oh, Anne, Anne, Anne. I don't believe

you ever have been able to see what an incredibly great biologist you are. I mean, a cancer cure *at eighteen?!!* Three years from undergrad degree to Doctorate! My god, Anne, of course he's asking for you. There probably are others but he doesn't know them like he knows you."

"But," she began to protest, "I'd be away from you and Tommy and Sandy and possibly at some risk of being infected. I can't just—"

"Can't just what, Anne? Can't just climb back into the saddle I practically yanked you out of? Can't go back to work with a top crew of people you already know and can get more work out of than probably anybody else? Can't?"

His voice had gone up nearly an octave making her smile in spite of her feelings and fears.

"Can't bear to be away from you," she replied picking an imaginary speck off his collar in her mind. "So, what you are saying is I can't refuse this?"

"No. I'm not going to tell you what to do. This is a two-person, two-way relationship we have, honey. But, there is a little more hanging on you right now. Sure, I have responsibility for keeping the company going, but things are getting better by the day. On your shoulders might ride the lives of people. Mine carry only financial responsibilities. Dad can take the kids. He's already said he would take them for a few weeks if you and I ever got some time to go away for ourselves."

He left it at that, preferring to give her some time to contemplate his words. A half-minute went by before she coughed a little and said into the phone, "I can call you every night, you know?"

Damon chuckled again. "Sure, and I can be sitting right by the phone waiting. Just as long as it is after about six when I expect I get be home. I love you, Anne Douglas Swift. You do what is right for you."

"They'll want me there tomorrow so I might need to head out on the six a.m. commuter to Albany."

"I'll have Mrs. Porter book your flights down. We can play it by ear for the return."

When she walked back into the kitchen and picked up the land line phone, she said, "Marc?"

"Here, Anne," he came back with a tentative sound in his voice.

"I'll be there tomorrow afternoon. Have someone ready to meet me at Jacksonville. I'll call with my arrival info when I change planes in Baltimore."

In the past year the lab facilities had changed only slightly, but there were new microscopes and five new incubators capable of accelerating growth by about thirty percent.

It took the first late afternoon to get up to speed on what they were faced with, and the status of what had been attempted in order to get a handle on the outbreak.

In all, there were one-hundred-eighty-two reported cases all clustered in and around the city of Knoxville. The governor of the state had issued a no travel order in and out of Knoxville three days earlier and so far it seemed to be containing the disease.

The next morning as Anne was sipping coffee with Marc, one of the technicians came in to say that blood samples had been sent and would be delivered within the next two hours.

"Only blood, Kathy?" she asked the young woman.

"That's what they say is coming, Anne. Should they send something else? We deal in blood here."

"Get them on the phone and tell them to collect sputum and stool samples and even get me some cheek scrapings. If they ask, tell them it is for DNA purposes to see if there is any susceptible hereditary trait. And samples of the cells from the spots themselves."

The girl took a deep breath, but said, "Roger, Anne. Oh, it's really great having you back!" With that, she disappeared around the corner.

The blood did tell one part of the story, but Anne was certain that the other samples would settle matters. While it appeared to be a measles virus at the base level, the fact that it was a partially double-stranded virus and not the typical single-strand variety gave her nightmares that night.

She needed to get samples under an electron microscope so she could delve into a much tinier realm than the standard microscopes could see.

By mid-day the following day she had the first fifty of the other samples in her lab, and Marc was securing some electron microscope time for her at the University of Central Florida in nearby Orlando.

She tried using the facility's standard microscopes but could only see the same sort of virus the blood samples provided. There were almost ghostly somethings attached or close to the cells, but she just did not have the magnification.

That changed on Friday morning.

In absolute horror, Anne and Marc—who had accompanied her—looked at the electron microscope's monitor and saw something neither expected.

There was a second, non-natural protein shell surrounding the basic viral cells. Attached to that were RNA strings—the ghostly bits—that seemed to be positioned to wave about like tentacles of a giant octopus. Only, there were dozens of them on each cell.

"Those aren't what I think they are, are they," he asked.

"If you are thinking they are man-made and this is not a natural virus and quite possibly something developed in a lab for god only knows what purpose, they I'd say yes."

Marc pulled out a cell phone Anne had never seen before. It was just as bulky as her flip phone, but had a much beefier octagonal antenna sticking a full four inches up from the top. He tapped a ten-number combination and set it on the table. Three minutes went by before a light in the back flashed brightly three times.

"This is Marc Stein. Florida. In regards Tennessee measles outbreak. Man-made. Find out what the lab boys are doing and if this got loose by accident. If not we have troubles. Also to follow, a protein-breaking inoculation."

He hung up. "Let's get back to our lab and I'll explain on the way."

Before they got back he had sworn her to secrecy, explained



that the lab was under contract to the U.S. Government, and that there was a secret Army experimental facility inside of Knoxville where this new strain could have originated.

Anne was horrified at the thought that some lax protocol might have unleashed this deadly strain, killing innocent children. And so it was with a large degree of anger that she spent the weekend formulating a virus killer. Basically it could break through the man-made protein barrier, weaken the natural one, and allow standard anti-viral medicines to break through and finish the job in about four days.

No other patients were admitted the next five days and nobody else died.

Nine days after her arrival, Anne hugged her former co-workers and departed the facility again, and for the very last time.

She arrived tired, hungry and frustrated in Shopton on the evening shuttle, with Damon and Tommy and Sandy there to meet her. After throwing herself into his arms and sobbing for nearly a minute, she sniffled and told the children that, "Mommy's just crying because she is so happy to see you!"

She woke up in the middle of the night, something she hadn't done since Sandy turned seven months old. She didn't like waking up, especially since her mind had been racing and started to scream at her just before her eyes popped open.

The trip home had given her lots of time to think about what she and the team in Florida accomplished and that it most likely saved countless lives and might have uncovered a near disaster at the hands of friendly scientists. She did not like that and felt she had to do something to stop it from happening again.

She realized what that was.

Anne Swift was going to take Agent Narz up on his offer. She was going for it!



## CHAPTER XII

### A VERY STRANGE PLACE

"YOU NEED to hurry up, Sandra Swift!" she chided her youngest. "No more dawdling. Get that last bite of cereal down your throat, get upstairs and wash you hands and be back here in two minutes ready to go!"

Sandy, one of nature's natural pouters whenever she felt put upon, crossed her arms over her chest and did just that. Anne, having been through the drill before, picked up her spoon, took her daughter's lower lip between her thumb and index finger and pulled it down an inch. The mouth opened in surprise, the spoon was in, the cargo delivered and spoon retracted so quickly that Sandy just swallowed.

Uncrossing her arms, she declared as she slipped off the chair, "Not fair! Tommy donna gotta have ta go upstairs!"

"And that is because your brother is a good little boy who finished his breakfast, went up and washed his hands and face, and came back down already. Plus, he talks right. Just like you know how to. Now, march!" She swung her right arm out, pointing at the kitchen door.

With such enormous effort that it was clear—at least to Sandy—that this was going to require all of her energy reserves, she trudged to the door, turned to look at her mother with her lower lip quivering, and then sighed as she walked out of the room and to the stairs.

It was only once she heard the bathroom sink turned on that Anne took the dish towel from her mouth where it had been stifling her laughter at Sandy's antics.

"I suppose you plan to remedy that fairly soon," Damon asked from behind his newspaper where he, too, had been holding in a good chuckle.

"I guess I need to at that," she replied.

"Anything planned for today?" he asked.

Anne found herself blushing furiously. Fortunately, her

husband was still looking at the Business section of the Albany paper. Shopton's own newspaper was only a twice-weekly that generally had eleven pages of ads and one page of news.

She cleared her throat and replied, "Not too much. Some shopping, a little vacuuming and I was thinking I might just drag out that sweater I started to knit last year. This winter is supposed to be a cold one and I think I'm going to need it."

Damon put the paper on the table, stood up and came over to her, wrapping his arms around Anne's waist and drawing her close.

"Why don't you do something a bit more exciting. Go shopping, and buy yourself something. The company is on the road to solid recovery and we can afford it. You've denied yourself some luxuries in favor of the kids. Treat yourself today. Okay?"

She buried her face in his chest and nodded. "Okay," came her muffled reply. She pulled back a little and added, "But, nothing extravagant. Like shoes. I've got enough of those. But, I might just buy a new winter coat. Is that enough for you?"

He laughed and kissed her nose. "Absolutely. Go for it!"

When Anne called Agent Narz to tell him her decision he almost couldn't speak he was so relieved. Finally, he managed to get out, "That's wonderful, Mrs. Swift. Wonderful and then some."

"Fine. Now that we are clear that it is wonderful, and that I might even be some sort of salvation for your program, what's next?" she inquired.

"Well, that isn't so easy to explain. You see, we are only set up normally to let our scientists in once a case has come our way. I think, though, in these circumstances I can at least give you a tour of the facility. Can you meet me downtown in front of the Merchants & Co. Bank in fifteen minutes?"

She looked at the clock on the kitchen wall. The kids would not be ready for pick up for about three hours.

"Okay. Am I supposed to wear dark glasses or a wide-brimmed hat pulled down over one eye? A rose clenched in my

left hand? Secret password regarding a hovercraft and eels?"

"No," the agent chuckled. "Just be sure you aren't being followed. If you see the same vehicle behind you for more than half your trip, don't pull up in front of the bank. Flash your lights from a block away and go around the block to your right. By the time you get to the front, I practically guarantee there will be nobody following you."

That sounded ominous, but she sighed and hung up.

Nobody appeared to be behind her for more than a few blocks so she pulled into an empty parking spot behind a light beige van. As she got out and came around the front of her car, hand in her purse looking for change for the meter, the FBI agent stepped out from the right side of his van.

"Here," he told her, handing over a small disc with a metal ring through it. "Look at the meter."

She did and was surprised to see that what she could have sworn was a red flag now showed that she had a full two hours of time.

He pointed to the small disc. "Put that on your key ring. It activates that meter, which, by the way will nearly always tell people that the meter is for Police Only and they cannot park in that space. Before you go inside come into my van and let me tell you a few things."

Shrugging, Anne walked up to the passenger side while Narz went around to the driver's door. Inside and with the doors and windows closed he began.

"Now, Mrs. Swift—or may I call you Anne?"

She shrugged. "Why not."

"Great. Now, Anne. Here's what I want you to do. Go inside and walk over to your left to the counter marked 'Safe Deposit Boxes.' A young woman will come over and ask which box number. Tell her 'Box 7-0-2-7.' And, yes I know that is the last four digits of your Social Security number. She will hand you a card. Sign it Barbie Boone. Then—"

"Wait just a cotton picking minute! I'm not going to be called Barbie Boone or Barbie *anything!*"

He grinned and shrugged. "Sorry, but that's the code name the Agency has given you."

"Then you tell the Agency that the deal is off. I don't work for you and won't. Barbie? For crying out loud. Do I look like a Barbie? Barbara, perhaps, but *Barbie!*"

"Okay. I'll let my superiors know, but this one time you will need to use the code name they expect in there. You see, this might be a working bank, but it is also the front for the lab facilities you will be using. Every person inside working here is an agent. So, please bear with this the one time. After today you won't even need to tell them who you are. They will know you."

She wasn't happy but let him explain the rest of the procedure. Once she told him she understood all the steps, he let her get out.

"I have my own way of getting inside and can't be seen going through the front door. I'll see you downstairs."

Anne got out letting the door close a bit harder than she might if she weren't a little miffed over the name issue. She straightened her jacket and walked up the three steps and into the bank. As described, over to her left was a small alcove with a counter. She approached it at the same time a woman rose from her desk and came to the counter.

"May I help you?"

"Yes. My name is... Barbie Boone. I need to get into my safety deposit box."

"Wonderful, Miss Boone. And the box number?"

"Seven zero two seven."

"Fine. Please sign this card and get out your key."

Anne blanched. Quimby hadn't given her any key. "Ummm—"

"Thank you," the woman said as if Anne had done precisely what she had been asked. "If you'll step this way, please?"

Anne followed, unsure what might be coming next. A drop-away floor with a shark tank underneath? A razor-sharp saw that would swing down once the woman passed but while Anne was in the way?

Neither. They entered through a locked bar gate and turned

to the left. At the rear of the vault the woman took out two keys which she inserted into the two locks on a moderately large box along the top row.

After turning them both she leaned over to Anne. "Once I leave please turn your key back to the normal position and remove it. Safeguard that please. Once the doorway opens step through quickly. Good to have you here."

She left Anne alone seconds later.

Eyeing the floor for that possible trap door, Anne turned the key and slid it out of the box. She pocketed it. To her startlement the entire wall of boxes moved back and away from her before sliding into the right wall. She poked her head inside the dimly lit area behind. There was little to see. But, she heard the wall begin to move again so she stepped through. The wall pushed back into place, and there was a slight series of clickings.

*I'll be those are locks*, she thought. The lights came on, and she discovered that she was in a small area with a downward stairway in front of her and a small shelf to her right. On the shelf was a piece of paper and a small credit card-sized badge with a magnetic backing.

**Please take the badge and place it somewhere visible on your blouse/shirt/jacket or other upper garment. Then, come downstairs to first door on right. QN**

She did.

There were more than thirty steps down indicating she was going more than a single story under the bank. At the bottom was a four-foot-wide hallway running from the stairs straight out more than one hundred feet. She could see at least three doors on the right side, two on the left, and a final one at the very end.

As instructed she walked to the first door on the right. It was open so she stepped inside and stopped.

It was a laboratory. No, it was much, much more than that. It was a super lab out of her fondest dreams. There were two desks with computer monitors and keyboards to her right, at least three stations with microscopes, autoclaves and other things to

her left, and along the back wall was a set of vertical blinds.

"Wondering what those hide?" Agent Narz's voice came from behind her, giving her a little start. When she nodded he walked over to them and pushed a button on the left wall. The blinds swung around and parted, ending up inside compartments on either side that closed, hiding them.

But that wasn't what got Anne's attention. It was what she saw behind the curtains.

A gleaming stainless steel room sat behind what appeared to be thick Plexiglas. It was perhaps twenty feet wide and at least half that deep. Inside sat several racks filled with surgical instruments, a light array designed to be remotely controlled that could obviously put light anywhere you wanted it, and two operating tables, also made from stainless steel.

She looked around and spotted numerous nozzles around the room and on the ceiling—also metal—that she had to ask about.

"Firstly, that is a total isolation chamber," he said. "As in a tighter clean room, more sterile, whatever you want than even the strictest manufacturing facility. It can be flooded with everything from disinfectant to pure oxygen, carbon dioxide, fluorine, and several other gases I can't recall.

"Nothing short of a pound of plastic explosives can breach it. It can be cooled down to minus fifteen degrees Fahrenheit and raised to two-hundred fifty. Everything you do inside there you will do either via the computers or with these," he said indicating the closest of two pairs of strange mechanical gloves.

"Waldoes?" she asked, surprising him.

"Well, yes. You know about them?"

"I've read Heinlein, Agent Narz. A lot of people have. Those are computer-enhanced analogs for human hands. The operator places her hands inside the gloves and everything you do, the mechanical hands inside mimic. They can be set to amplify movement or to downscale it to an incredible level and to a degree of precision that is phenomenal. Right so far?"

He nodded, his appreciation for her knowledge obviously impressing him.



"I'll assume that whatever goes in there is dead, so why the blinds? Afraid people out here will get the willies if something like *rigor mortis* causes a patient to start to bend?"

He laughed. "No. Actually a fellow who claims to be an expert in human behavior tells us that people sitting on this side of things will feel better if they don't have to stare at the isolation chamber all the time."

She walked over to the thick window.

"He's an idiot!" she declared. "I counted. It takes fifteen seconds to get the blinds open and stowed. I'll assume the same for getting them back out. Needless time wasted. And, noisy to boot. Just give us a way to switch on and off the lights in there. Besides, an obvious moron who went to a seminar on what Joe Public might feel obviously has no appreciating for what scientists and doctors will think of this. I say rip 'em out!"

Narz nodded. "You may be interested to know that a colleague you may work with from time to time feels the same. It will take some time—the wheels of government roll neither smoothly nor quickly—but I'll see what I can do. Anything else strike you?"

She rubbed her chin in thought. It was a gesture she had subconsciously picked up from her husband. It was infectious because their son, Tommy, was also starting to do it when he was thinking over something.

"What about live patients? Or, do we only deal with the dead?"

He made a "come with me" motion with his index finger. They walked next door to what she immediately could see was a hospital-like ward containing ten enclosed cubicles that could be sealed from one another and from the larger room. Each one held a bed, computer station and a TV.

"This is our live patient ward. With any luck we will never fill it, but there will be times when our best bet—your best bet—will be dealing with people who can communicate with you."

Anne agreed with the logic of it, but had to ask, "So, unless you want me to just drop everything in the middle of a crucial procedure or test to come get water for anyone in here, do you

plan to staff this room with someone twenty-four / seven?"

Narz furrowed his brow in thought, "Hmmm. That never occurred to our planner."

"If that's the same alpha minus semi-moron who decided to turn the lab into a living room out of the seventies, then it isn't any wonder."

She turned and walked from the room heading farther down the hall.

The next room down the corridor was a fully stocked storage room with nearly everything she could think might be needed in the lab and the patient ward.

The final door at the end opened to a bright lounge and break room. A trio of refrigerators were arranged next to a counter that held, among other things, a 12-cup coffee maker, toaster large enough to handle six bagel halves, a pair of microwave ovens, blender, and a juicer.

Two tables, each with four chairs, filled part of the middle of the room, and another door led off to the left.

"Food supplies? I'm assuming we can't just waltz in the bank with grocery bags."

"You are correct, Anne. Any time the lab is to be put to use all stores are brought to maximum. Two weeks foods, fresh and frozen, for ten people plus juices and other fresh beverages, like milk. Each five days sensors tell us what has been used and a shipment comes in, rises from below—the same as anything that goes into your isolation chamber—into the storage room where it can be unpacked by anyone."

"And, that?" Anne inquired, pointing at another door.

"The bunk room. Four bunk beds so that any staff can grab some shuteye when necessary," he told her opening the door so she might see. "Also has the restroom."

"Ahhh. One and only one single-occupant bathroom, I see. How quaint! Where will everyone else go if this is occupied and we have some sort of vomiting disease running rampant? Or something wholly more unpleasant at the other end of things?"

Agent Narz pulled a small notebook from his jacket pocket and made yet another note in it. He already had about a dozen things on the list of what Anne, once she reviewed it with him, called his "deficiency list."

"So there is just the one lab down here. What if there are two emergency things to be handled? Timeshare?"

He smiled and shook his head. "There are three complete and totally isolated lab setups down here. Now, before you ask, there is more than a single wall of deposit boxes up there, you know!"

The doors on the opposite side of the hall from the lab were storage for food, cleaning supplies, "And the small nuclear device we keep just in case of something especially nasty getting out," he said trying to look innocent.

Anne said a dirty word to him before turning back to the stairs. "That," she called over her shoulder, "is enough for today. I have children to pick up. Good day, Agent."

"But, Mrs. Swift—Anne—don't you want to know how we'll get in touch with you when we need you?"

She stopped at the fifth step. "All right. How?" If nothing else, Anne Swift was a curious person. His was a challenge she couldn't resist even though she wanted to. She came back down to stand in front of him.

She was about to cross her arms over her breasts but realized how much she wanted her daughter to stop doing that, so her hands fell to her sides.

He pulled a cell phone from his jacket pocket. It was identical to hers. "This will be your new phone. We have already copied your contact list, calendar, and all other data from the phone you are carrying right now. It's all on this one, plus a little something extra. Inside is a special circuit to scramble the signal whenever you talk to me. Or to Harlan Ames." He looked to see how she might take that news.

"I see. So, Harlan is actually going to be a secret agent for you all the while keeping my husband and family and friends and the news media and the world from finding out about this little double life you want me involved in?"

Quimby Narz smiled and nodded. "Yes."

"And I suppose I shouldn't hate him for being involved in this."

"Please don't. He is doing this more than slightly against his better judgement, but he does have a grasp of the bigger picture, so go easy on him. He's a really great man."

"Yes, I know. And I am married to an even greater man, in my opinion, who I feel wretched about not being able to mention anything about this place or my job."

"All I can say is that it has been determined that you and he are safer this way, Anne." She only nodded slightly.

He explained about a special ring tone and set of code numbers she would hear and see whenever he or Ames called. His would end with the number 1 while Harlan's calls would end in the number 2.

Narz also told her that most times she needed to speak with him, he would not answer directly. She was to speed dial the number 369, leave a short message, and he would get back to her as quickly as possible.

"Generally, that will be within thirty seconds. So, do you have everything?"

"Yeah." She glanced at her watch. "I have to go pick up Sandy and Tommy, so I guess I'll just stand by and wait for you to call?"

"That's the system, Anne."

She left noticing that the parking meter had recently reset as it showed **1:47** on the face.

Anne smiled to herself as she started her car.

In spite of her complaints and suggestions to Agent Narz, she was now positively excited and itching to get into a good case in *her* lab!

## CHAPTER XIII

### "YOU'LL HAVE TO FIGURE THAT OUT"

FIVE WEEKS came and went as Anne nervously waited for her phone to ring. It did almost on a daily bases, but the calls were from friends, Damon, school—three calls about Sandy and one, "Please tell us what to do," call regarding Tommy being so far ahead of all other first graders—and a few "incredible offers designed specifically for discerning housewives such as yourself, Mrs. Fendergast!"

Anne wasn't a fool and realized that there must have been a previous owner of the phone number she was assigned when they moved up from Florida, but she could find no Fendergast family listed in the Shopton phone book and even a visit to the local company offices shed no light on who those people had been.

Since there were only a couple of those, and she had explained to the caller that they had a wrong number, those soon stopped.

And yet, the one call she both dreaded and hoped for did not come.

Until the Monday after Thanksgiving.

She grabbed the handset and brought it up to her ear with so much force that she almost hit herself with it.

"It's Anne," she breathlessly said into it."

"It's Harlan, Anne. How about a coffee. I have some business at my bank, so we can meet there first if that's all right with you."

Her heart was racing. She took a couple of breaths to calm down and told him that would be fine.

"Great. Twenty minutes? The branch on third."

She agreed to the time and place.

Taking only time to brush her teeth and her hair she left the house, nearly forgetting in her excitement to lock the door behind her, and drove off for her appointment.

Harlan Ames was waiting for her outside the bank door,

sitting on the steps. When he saw her car approach he glanced at the meter in time to watch it change from a red, POLICE ONLY face to the digital timer that registered the full two hours of available time.

He stood up as she shut the engine off, exited the car and walked to the meter, pretending to dig in her purse for change and mimed putting the nonexistent coins into it.

"Hello, Anne," he said coming over to her. "Great to see you. Hope you and the family had a fine Thanksgiving?"

Only because there was a woman coming out from the bank did Anne keep up the pretense conversation.

"It was great. We found out that Sandy hates Brussels Sprouts while Tommy can't get enough of them. Imagine that."

He held the door for her and they stepped inside. While he walked over to the tellers' row Anne made the left turn and went to the deposit box window.

The same Asian woman who had been there before greeted her with a bright smile and made it sound as if this were her thousandth time there, not only her second.

"Oh, it's great to see you again. Nice holiday?" and so it went as Anne signed the offered card, followed the woman into the vault area and over to the deposit boxes.

"I'll let Mr. Ames know you went through," she told Anne before disappearing back to her desk.

Inside the sliding wall of deposit boxes she found a new magnetic badge card and slipped in onto her blouse above her left breast.

The magnet was icy cold against her skin and made her lightly gasp.

Down the stairs she went arriving at the lab door where she had to stop to take another few deep breaths.

*This is it, old girl, she told herself. Time the rubber hits the road, or the bottom hits the stool.*

She lightly tapped her middle right knuckle on the door and turned the handle, opening it. Inside nearly everything looked as she remembered it, but she found herself smiling broadly at the

sight of the missing vertical blinds and the now fully visible isolation chamber at the back of the room.

"Like it, Annie," as strangely familiar, deep male voice asked.

She spun to her left. Standing there, a silly grin spread across his face, stood Wiley Oswaldt.

"Oh, my god! Wiley!" she practically screamed as she took five fast steps over to the man who had been her mentor and friend during her college years. She wrapped her arms around him, and he returned the gesture, adding a little kiss to the top of her head.

As she stepped back, eyes wide with curiosity, he smiled again. "I'll bet you are wondering why this ancient wreck of a school teacher is standing here in a top secret lab deep under the ground in your little home town. Am I correct?"

Anne had to laugh. "Of course that's what I'm thinking. But, I am also thinking how wonderful it is to see you. Ummm," she bit her lower lip, "so what is the story?"

"Let us go have a nice cup of coffee in the lunch room down the hall," he suggested.

When he opened the door for her she half expected to see Harlan or Agent Narz sitting there, but the room was empty. Wiley crossed to the coffee machine and poured them both steaming mugs.

"Do you still take just a little dab of milk and that horrible stuff in the pink packets?" he inquired holding both mugs close to his chest.

She shook her head. "Unless it is particularly nasty-tasting coffee. Most days I take it black," she told him accepting hers but setting it on the table.

They both sat down. He took a sip, made a face and apologized. "This is not a *nice* cup of coffee. Sorry."

She smiled at him and said it would do for now.

"So, before I go into my spiel, how in the world have you been, Annie? But, I must tell you I know about your professional achievements, and you will find out why that is in a moment. I hear that you are a married woman with two children. Tell me

everything."

For more than an hour she told him what had gone on in her life after leaving Boston. It felt so good and so right to be talking frankly to him that she skipped nothing, ending with, "No it's your turn, Wiley. I have the feeling something has been afoot for years and you are in the middle of it. Spill those particular beans if you please."

He smiled at her getting up to refill their mugs.

"I shall skip over the years before I was fortunate enough to meet you and become your counsellor. Suffice it to say that what I now tell you extends back at least five years before our becoming colleagues. And, yes, I tell you now that I never thought of you as a student. You were and are in every way a very professional colleague, only you did not know it at the time. So, I was both a professor as well as a part time employee of the Federal Bureau of Investigation. Those several time I disappeared? Assignments such as the one coming our way tomorrow."

"You worked in this remote lab?"

"No," he said shaking his head. "Another facility that I cannot tell you about, but I will say not nearly as well planned as this one." He looked toward the door. "I understand that we have you to thank for the removal of those atrocious blinds in the lab. Good girl!"

He spent almost a second hour telling her of some of his exploits and of the people above him who kept pushing him to give Anne more and more duties that the university would have been apoplectic had they known about them.

"It is such a wonderful thing that you were mature beyond your years and kept every confidence just that. And now, I have to tell you that we get to work together once again, only this time the student becomes the teacher and the teacher willingly accepts the status change."

She reached over and squeezed his hand. "I'll defer to your judgement in everything I can, Wiley. Especially while I get my feet wet here."

He perked up and listened. "I do believe I hear footsteps



coming down the hall. I only want to tell you one final thing, Annie. You were an exceptionally cute college girl, but you have blossomed into a wondrously beautiful woman. I shall find your beauty a distraction so forgive an old man if you catch him stealing glances at you from time to time."

She smiled at him. "You go right ahead. I consider it a great compliment." She leaned over the table and kissed him on the cheek.

"What's this?" Quimby Narz asked as the door opened in time to let him see the end of Anne's kiss."

"This, Agent Narz, is a wonderful reunion and I as just telling Wiley here how much I have missed him. And, it is also none of your damned business!"

He sat down at the table with them. "Of course. Forgive me. Uhh, it is great to see that you are still willing to come in, Mrs. Swift... or Anne. Now, before I get into what this is about I wanted to tell you of a status change. One you should be happy with. You are no longer Agent Barbie Boone for purposes of contact outside the facility."

"Well, that's something."

"Yes. But your alternate identity had been well established using that name and so it was decided well above my head and grade of pay that all the FBI can do is to make it a more adult, 'Barbara Boone.' I'm sorry that it is out of my control."

"Well, here's to the hope I never have to use that name. Some day, Agent Narz, you must introduce me to the person who decided on that name. I would personally like to give them a punch in the kidneys by way of thanks!"

"I'll try to do that," he offered. "And, can we get to the point where we aren't so formal? Please call me Quimby and know that just as you hate your ID, I hate mine as much. And, that I once submitted my resignation over it but was dragged before the Director and told to stop being childish and just accept it."

Anne found a small level of respect for the agent on hearing this. However, as someone called 'they' often said, time was a-wasting.

"So, tell us about this case. Please remember that I need to be

out of here by two-forty each day, including this one and that it is unlikely I can get here any sooner than eight-forty in the morning."

Narz nodded. "I know and will try to respect that. The case coming in is a new one. We just found out this morning that it will not be tomorrow, but rather next Monday. For now there are about twenty-seven people who took part in what was supposed to be a rescue mission who found nobody to rescue but now all of them are suffering from nearly identical symptoms."

He described everything he knew and tried to answer their basic medical and scientific questions. Frustrated at some important but missing information Anne looked at Wiley, her eyes showing her emotions. He patted her forearm and gave her an almost imperceptible nod.

She calmed down understanding that it wasn't that Quimby Narz was holding back on anything, he simply did not know or have the background to know that he needed to be able to tell them more.

Ten minutes later he stopped and looked at them.

"Give me a second to get out my notebook and then tell me everything I'm missing that you want or need to know."

They spent seven minutes detailing nearly fifteen areas where his information fell short and another three where he had nothing at all for them.

His parting words to them were, "Stand by for more calls. It might be wise if you sort of planned to be here on Friday to review any of this information," he tapped his jacket pocket, "that I can manage to find out."

The door closed and Wiley looked at Anne.

"Old times?" he asked with a wink.

"Seems like," she told him. "But it seems more like the case down in Tennessee a couple months ago. And, if it is we're going to have a hell of a bad time unless we can get our new bestest nuddy, Quimby, to scrounge up an electron microscope for us." She looked at her friend. "Did that subject ever come up before?"

He shook his head. "Truth to tell, I was neither consulted nor was I brought into the loop until this place was a *fate acompli*. All I can get from Brother Q is that you and I will be the first to use this lab, and yet the bank was built, to the best of my knowledge, more than three years ago. This isn't the sort of place you sneak under an existing building, so I have to conclude that things have been in the works, as it were, for longer than that."

Anne stood. "Lucky us. We get a mystery of a facility and one of a medical nature. Let's hope the second is easier to solve than the first."

Amen!"

\* \* \* \* \*

By Wednesday afternoon Anne was trying to decide if she should just show up Friday morning or whether she needed to wait for Quimby Narz to call.

It was getting to the time she needed to pick her children up so she grabbed her keys and cell phone, headed out the door and nearly dropped everything when he phone rang. However, a fast glance at the screen didn't show any code numbers.

"Hello?" she said into it.

"Mrs. Swift?"

"Speaking."

"This is Miss Quackenbush, Sandy's teacher here at the kindergarten. Do you have a moment to talk?"

Anne looked around and decided that she had to get going, so she opened the car and started climbing in.

"I can spare a couple minutes, but I am just getting ready to pull out of my driveway to come get her and then on to the elementary school for my son."

"Oh. How is Tommy getting along? I can't imagine they can keep up with that boy's ability to learn and reason things out. Last year I almost asked you if he was really five or if his growth was stunted." She laughed at what she imagined must be a hilarious joke. Anne didn't. Instead she started the car.

"I hate to rush you, but can we get to the heart of this call, please?"

As she held the phone in one hand and steered with the other, the teacher explained that things had come to a head with Sandy that morning and the girl had been sent to sit in the "naughty chair."

"I didn't want it to come as a shock to you, Mrs. Swift. Most children learn the little lesson in about two minutes. After an hour she still seemed perfectly happy to sit there all by herself. It was only once my assistant went over to ask if she was going to be a good girl that we discovered Sandy had shoved a couple of her favorite small toys up her shirt and had been quietly playing with them all that time."

Unable to help herself, Anne laughed.

"Listen, Miss Quackenbush. Sandy is a headstrong little girl who envies her brother so much that she is in this 'I'm all grown up' state of mind. I'll tell you what I do at home. I run her around. When the weather is nice out she has to run around the yard three times. We have a fairly large lot so she comes back tired and completely reasonable. I know you folks like to keep them all inside and safe and warm, but when I signed her up I *did* tell the admin folks she needed daily exercise."

"Well, we can't always—"

"Not to be rude, but I'm coming to a busy road, so I will ask you this. Is it you can't or *don't want to* find the time? I'll be there in ten minutes. In the meantime I suggest that you spend a moment trying to figure out what to do on your own. My understanding is that is your job. Good-bye."

The teacher must not have wished to confront Anne as she was nowhere to be seen. Almost all the children were out waiting with the two assistants. The one with Sandy in her group brought the girl to the car and leaned in the passenger window.

"Miss Q thinks you are angry with her, Mrs. Swift. Is that right?"

Anne laughed. "Not angry, just disappointed that she always seems to have plenty of time to call and complain about Sandy but not enough to do what I suggested more than a month ago."

The aide promised to try to spend some exercise time with the girl.

After pulling away from the curb, Anne looked at her

daughter in the back, sitting on her harnessed booster seat.

"Sandra Helene Swift?"

"Yes, Mother?"

"I heard all about what you did. And... before you look at me in this mirror and lie about doing nothing, I want to tell you that I will be giving your teacher permission to put you in that chair after searching you for contraband, each and every day for the rest of the school year. All day. Is that what you want?"

Sandy's eyes teared up. She knew she had been found out and also knew her mother had reached that point where the girl should not press things further.

"I'm sorry, Mommy," she said, her nose starting to run and the tears running down her cheeks.

By the time they collected Tommy she was finished crying but her face was a mess. Anne handed Tommy some tissues and asked him to wipe his sister's nose and face.

"Face first then nose," she added as she caught a devilish gleam in her son's eye.

"Okay," he said as if this was ruining his afternoon. But, he did as she asked and they were soon heading home. "How was school, Tommy?"

"It's really boring, Momsie. The teacher hands out these lanim... lamniated... ummm *laminated* card with stuff to read and then gives us something like twenty minutes. Golly, Momsie. It only takes three to read that stuff. What's the matter with those other kids? Did I end up in the retard class?"

"Thomas Swift! You now better than to use terms like that. And, no. You are not in any special class; it is just that nearly all children your age are not as smart as you are or had the chance to learn to read so well at such an early age."

She spotted the oncoming intersection, signaled a turn she had not planned to make, and took her son and daughter to the library. There, while she and Sandy sat in the children's area close to the early reader books, the ones with about three pictures for every 5-word sentence, Tommy headed to the section marked "5th Grade Learning And Fun."

The librarian attempted to intercept him but he looked at her as she tried to tell him, "Those are books for big girls and boys," by explaining to her that, "My reading and comprehension level is nearly at fifth grade levels. Please let me decide what I can and cannot read. Thanks, though, for your assistance!"

She went back to her desk slightly defeated and kept a close eye on him. When he did come up with almost twenty books ranging from science fiction to a biography on Daniel Boone, she looked at the stack and then at him.

"Yes, ma'am. I can read those books. I'll have them back to you in about two weeks unless you want me to bring a couple back each day."

"No... no you go ahead and keep them the full month if you need to, uhhh..."

He held out his hand. "Tom Swift, ma'am."

She shook it and murmured, "A pleasure."

Anne's call came the next morning as she was walking back in the garage door. She set her purse on the counter, dug out the phone and checked the screen.

"Hello, Quimby," she said. "I recognized your number. Are we on? I'm ready to go as long as I can keep my hours."

"We are. And, you can. Wiley is in there today helping with a new piece of equipment and all the samples from our victims—alive and deceased—come in between three and five in the morning. Dr. Oswaldt will be able to show you how everything works. I will not be there until early next week, so you just get going on whatever it is you can do to identify what is happening to these people."

"Oh, I will, Quimby. You can bet your— well, your bottom dollar that Wiley and I will get this figured out! One question is, where do we start?"

"That is why we are paying you. You'll need to figure that out for yourself. Don't let me down. We've lost five of the people and I don't want the others to die on us."

*As if that is what we'll let happen,* she told herself as she folded the phone and placed it back in her purse.

## CHAPTER XIV

### A THRILLING DELIVERY—AN ODD TALE

ANNE ARRIVED a few minutes before the bank was to open, but the door swung inward and the Asian woman motioned for her to enter.

With nobody in the bank other than employees the female agent dispensed with the signing in and took Anne directly into the vault. Two minutes later she opened the door to the lab and stepped inside.

Anne practically stumbled over her own feet when she walked into the lab that day to see the shiny electron microscope that had been set up in the last few days. Quimby Narz had been good to his word! It was obviously not a brand new model, in fact she believed it might even be more than two decades old, but it appeared to have been well kept and came with a state-of-the-art monitor.

A technician she had not previously see—nor was she ever to see him again—was connecting the monitor cable.

Turning, he addressed her as, "Ma'am," and told her he would be gone in another five minutes.

"They got me up here from New Jersey early this morning to set this up. Said something about trying some old-fashioned research. Guess that's up to you. Umm, will you need me to show you how to use this?"

"No. I used one just like it before. Not as shiny as this one, though. Uh, isn't this kind of old? I thought the entire model was eventually called in and scrapped," she asked finally taking a closer look at the device.

"Listen, Mrs. Swift. We have to take what we can get. Even the FBI can't just run out and buy an electron microscope without raising any number of eyebrows. We have to use so many channels you'd think we were a cable TV broadcaster. Give us a year or so and we'll get something newer."

She smiled at him.

"This baby was one of the two at Walter Reed Hospital. They never sent their's back and maintained some sort of service contract with Philips. They even upgraded it at some point. Now it's capable of one-point-two-five-seven-five nanometers and not just the two nanometers it could scan to originally."

Anne smiled. She had worked with an electron microscope at U.C. Berkeley with greater magnification, and certainly with more refinements, but this would do nicely for nearly all applications she could think of off hand.

"And, what has the gizmo fairy brought us?" came Wiley's voice from the doorway. "Oh. Isn't it wonderful? This young man has brought us a real, honest-to-goodness dinosaur, Annie. Look at what he's brought."

She turned around to see him rolling his eyes and sadly shaking his head.

"One would have thought Brother Q would get us something a little better. I was working with this model back years before I met you. Tsk-tsk!"

The technician stood up from his final adjustments to the cables.

"I'm sorry that you don't like this, Doctor. As I was explaining to Doctor Swift this has been fully upgraded and is very capable."

"It's not his problem or his fault, Wiley," she said coming to the aid of the young man. She mentioned the new, tighter nanometer focal range and his eyebrows shot up.

"Well, that makes all the difference in the world... not! This model still requires a dead sample, or it will make it that way. What if we need to examine living tissue? What about the small number of viral strains that positively explode when introduced to radiation?"

Anne gave him a soft, tinkling laugh. "Yes, and what about the other ninety-seven percent that don't? For the time being, and as long as Quimby is working on the matter, this will do."

Another voice came from behind Wiley.

"As long as I do what?" He looked at the technician. "Not finished yet, Gerald?"



"Just got the last connection tightened, Agent Mi— Umm Narz. The video cable that came with it had a short in one of the sub-lines so I chopped out the bad part and now they're good to go. You just can't move the monitor any farther away than it already is," he said to Anne and Wiley. "I'll try to get a new cable before Monday."

With that, he picked up his toolkit and small canvas bag of supplies, with the logo of the Newark, New Jersey Public Broadcasting Station on the side, and walked past them and down the hall toward the break room.

Frowning, Anne inquired, "Can he get out that way, Quimby?"

"We all can. In an emergency or when secrecy is necessary. Have Wiley show you later. For now, I have big news for you both. Want it here or in the break room?"

"I, for one, wish to have at least two cups of coffee in me within the next thirty minutes and I fail to see any pot, urn or samovar in this room, so I vote for adjourning down the hall," Wiley said as he walked past the agent and headed to the break room.

"I had a fine cup this morning as I got my children ready to go and could use another," Anne stated as she walked Agent Narz and followed her colleague.

"And I guess that I shouldn't stand here talking to an empty room," Quimby said as he, too, followed.

He got to the room as Wiley was handing Anne the first steaming mug. She smelled the aroma and looked sideways at the agent.

"You will obviously have to do something about replacing this vile collection of toasted wood shavings, crumbled burnt toast ends, and the occasional dead insect part with some real coffee for us, Quimby. I have the feeling this is war surplus ground muck that managed to slip past the wholesomeness police." She took a sip and winced. "I was right!"

"Anne, it isn't that bad," he retorted picking the mug from her hands and taking a sip. "Oh, gack! It *is* that vile. I'll call upstairs and have someone go to that coffee shop on the next block to get

us something drinkable."

As he pulled out his phone, Anne tapped him on the forearm. "And, get this replaced before Monday or I walk in and walk right out again." He nodded.

When he replaced his phone he let them know acceptable coffee would be on its way in about five minutes.

"So, let's sit and I'll give you the briefing on this case."

They all sat and he began laying out the facts that were known.

A small cargo ship—about three-hundred feet in length displacing nearly two-thousand tons—left the small shipping port of Saint Blazey Gate in southern England three weeks earlier bound for St. Johns, Newfoundland in Canada. It's cargo was unknown as it had been a private shipment arranged through a series of brokers.

So far, not even Interpol had been able to trace the cargo back to the originator. But, the port being both a hard cargo and oil storage facility made it more difficult by being operated by a public consortium of local businesses, none of which claimed to have been part of the shipment.

"All ships are supposed to carry a piece of equipment that sends out a specific code that is picked up and lets ships be tracked. Some ships do not wish to be tracked and turn off their beacon as soon as they lose sight of land. Some are located and people go to jail over it. A few even are foolhardy enough to try getting through the Suez or Panama Canals without their beacons running."

"Ah," Wiley offered, "I recall an instance where a cargo ship was detained for many months when it was discovered to be carrying not just the dried beans listed on her manifest but something like a dozen Russian MIG jets underneath bound for one unfriendly nation or another."

"Yes. Not just the once that was made public. There have been at least a half dozen ships taken into custody. That first one got bailed out and was stopped again six months later doing the same damn thing."

"Oh, my!" Anne said. "What did they do then?"

Quimby smiled. "Took the good cargo off, emptied and scrubbed her of all fluids, then hauled the ship out to sea and sank it. The crew went to prison."

He returned to the story. The ship had disappeared—at least its beacon had gone silent—three days out of port. It had slowed down a few hours before that and the prevailing opinion was they experienced some sort of mechanical problem. There was no call for aide and a passing ship heading the other way on the following day reported the cargo ship, the *Wabana Pearl*, was underway at about nine knots.

"How fast should it have been traveling," Anne interrupted.

Narz looked down at his notes. "Well, it left British waters at sixteen knots. My supposition is that is the speed it should have kept."

With no land masses on a direct route from England to their destination the only thing to do to track any such ship was to rely on the sporadic satellites that orbited and photographed the Earth.

"Those are mostly what the public calls 'spy satellites,' and it takes a near act of Congress to get them to give any civilian agency some time. However, we lucked out in that a French satellite they contend is a weather forecasting tool—that just happens to pass over Russia every third orbit and the upper half of China every other one—" he made a snorting sound signaling his deep disbelief. "Well, suffice it to say they were running a camera test that we sort of intercepted as they sent the signals down to a small facility they maintain on the island of Ouessant. Anyway, several of their shots—ones I might add that were the absolute focal point of the photos—showed the cargo ship."

"What sort of detail is that satellite capable of?" Wiley inquired.

"All I have been told is that if a large number of the crew had been on deck, they might have been discerned. One or two probably would not have been seen."

"How about after those pictures were taken?"

"Well, Anne, after that we have nothing. Not for two weeks. Finally, a Canadian Navy destroyer spotted the ship heading for

Nova Scotia. They tried contacting the ship and got nothing. They even pulled along side and hailed the ship through their loudspeaker system. Nothing. They were about to board her when a call came through telling them that the ship was full of sick people but under control. They said they were voluntarily quarantining themselves and would be putting down anchor somewhere in Chedabucto Bay."

"Well, that is a sound precaution, isn't it?"

Narz shook his head. "No, and for two good reasons. One, the bay is too deep. A ship of that size probably carries six-hundred feet of anchor chain at the very most. They'd need a thousand to stop anywhere farther from shore than a half mile. And that, from what I've been provided, is insufficient for self-quarantine."

Anne sighed. "And, the other reason?"

"Well, it came through too late, but that radio message did not originate from the ship!"

The three of them sat in silence contemplating how ominous that now made the story. Anne broke the quiet with a question.

"Where did they end up?"

Narz pulled out a map that had a red line from their port of origin nearly straight until it neared Nova Scotia at which time it turned north by perhaps fifteen degrees. He stabbed his finger down where it intersected land.

"There. It hit the coast miles from anywhere right by a body of partially fresh water called Red Head Lake. Not a lot nearby except for a little used dirt runway airport. It's a strange airport, by the way. Two complete intersecting runways with the main one running nineteen-hundred feet from zero-four-zero down to two-two-zero that is technically long enough for military cargo planes and private jets, and the other one about five-hundred feet shorter. Whoever built it even prepped a spot for a terminal building and an area for about a dozen planes to park. They just never tarmac'd it."

"How far from where the ship hit?"

"Three-quarters of a mile, and get this... there is an access road from about a hundred feet off their bow that goes right to

the airfield."

Anne stood up and stretched. "This sounds more James Bond spy and stuff that in does a medical case. Where do Wiley and I come in?"

"The nearby farming community, if that isn't too much an overstatement of half a dozen family farms, all headed over to lend assistance. When a rescue team from Guysborough, maybe an hour away on the rough roads, arrived, they found the Hadleyville folk all sitting around looking dazed and confused. Every one of them had a fever of between one-hundred and one-hundred-one. They got bundled up and taken to the hospital."

"But, I'm assuming no crew were located. Otherwise I think you might have mentioned them."

"That is correct, Doctor Oswaldt. No crew visible on shore or inside the ship. I think you can guess what happened next."

Anne sat back down and her head slumped onto her hands. "Don't tell us that the rescue team didn't have protective clothing and they also ended up with a fever in the hospital."

Narz nodded. "As did the fire engine crew responding from north of the site from a place called," he consulted his papers again, "Port Hawkesbury. The fortunate thing is that both of the hospitals recognized they were going to have a problem and set up containment rooms. With one exception we've heard of, it has worked to contain the problem."

"And, we don't know what that problem is, do we?" Anne guessed.

"We do not. All we do know is that the RCMP has had to fly in about twenty Mounties to keep people away. Even the possibility of disease or death doesn't keep the would-be looters away."

"Okay. The other big one, please. Why are *we* involved? Why not Canadian medical teams taking this one?"

Now, Quimby got up. He began to pace. Eventually he realized the other two were waiting and so he stopped and faced them.

"The President has made a specific request. Knowing that the FBI has this and, well, other labs, he made the call last week. It turns out that half of his family is from Canada. Three

generations ago they stayed and his side moved down to Connecticut."

"Don't tell us, and I really mean *don't*, Quimby, that it's his Canuck family that had those farms in that Hadleyville place!"

Agent Quimby Narz knew his duty but he was a shrewd judge of character. He knew Anne didn't want to hear about the connection, but he had to nod his head.

Anne said a rather dirty word and hit the tabletop with her fist.

"Why do things like this just all fit together? Why couldn't it have been a case of a dozen crew members radioing for assistance and getting help? The President's family?" She repeated the dirty word. "Okay. When do we get people, samples of whatever we are going to receive?"

"An Air Force flying hospital plane is picking up everyone from both hospitals Sunday at around midnight. They'll use that dirt airfield. Maximum secrecy will apply. We will be getting eleven people, nine male and two female. The infected firefighters are being kept up there in quarantine because we obviously can't handle even as many as we are going to receive. But, the two women are going to be placed in a separate isolation tent we will have set up in the hospital room next to the lab."

He asked if they had any questions, and the only one Anne could articulate was about their own safety.

"You will never be exposed to any of the patients or the samples." He paused and looked confused. "Didn't I show you how you will handle all materials?"

Anne shook her head. "Nope! You spent so much time on the 'Only you,' and 'Patriotic duty,' stuff that I suppose that part slipped your mind."

"And, while I know most of the drill from the other lab back in the good old days, I could certainly use a refresher for this new set-up," Wiley added.

Narz took them down the hall, first to the hospital room with its isolation cubicles.

"Each of those rooms is self-contained. Each has its own

water supply and air circulatory system. That air, by the way, is sterilized as it comes in from an adjoining rooftop, cooled back down to a steady sixty-eight degrees, and then into a splitter for the ten rooms. Once it is in its individual duct, a one-way valve system keeps it from coming back."

"Can I take a shot at this next part?" Anne asked. Narz nodded. "Fine. Then it would make the most sense that once it passes into and through a room it is then sterilized again—high heat?" Another nod, plus he added:

"We also use extremely intense ultraviolet light at that stage."

"Good. Then it goes back outside and is not reused?"

"You've got it. We take it in, filter and clean it to standards that are, frankly, unbelievable, and return it cleaner than it has been in a ten thousand years. The same with the water."

He told them about how a single nurse would be in the room at all times, fully outfitted in an isolation suit with its own air supply. All that person was doing was monitoring the patients, dispensing—via a control board—all food, liquids and medications."

"Even IVs are inserted remotely," he explained.

Back in the lab room he went over everything from the operations to call up anything already, or to be sampled, from storage below their current level. Both Anne and Wiley were proficient in using the Waldoes so he skipped over that part.

To her amazement she discovered that samples were fully contained in sample bottles, jars and other containers, the exterior fully sterilized before it left the isolation chamber and from that point traveled exclusively in a double-walled, shatterproof plexiglas tunnel to the destination equipment chosen by the lab personnel.

"From microscope to blood testing equipment, to spectroanalysis to centrifuge and incubator to our new electron microscope, it all happens without any physical contact or exposure." He proudly smiled.

"What about us? What about our bringing in some pathogen?" Anne inquired.

"Oh. Right. Well, if you've seen the movie or read the book

*Andromeda Strain*, then you've already seen how we flash burn away all surface skin and hair from your entire body..." Quimby was watching for any reaction. She remained deadpan.

"Which means that any time *you* come to visit *us* you also have to get the same treatment. Just as long as it is fair and equitable."

Defeated at his own game, Narz relented. "Okay. Not so much with that stuff, but there is an active air sterilization system in the lab. We're certain of the most containment possible short of bricking people in. And, as you descend the stairs each time you come in you will pass through an ultra-fine mist of chemicals that you won't even feel, but they will take care of anything you have on your clothes and exposed skin."

"We just have to remember that from steps five through fifteen to hold our breaths," Wiley added. "Not that it is noxious, but it smells slightly of lavender and I hate that smell!"

With about three hours before she had to leave, Anne accepted Quimby's invitation to practice making examinations, collecting samples and bringing in existing ones, and sending things to all the equipment. In the end she had to admit it was a near flawless system.

"Oh, but what is not perfect in your mind," Narz asked.

"Having to go next door to talk to or examine one of the patients, for starters."

He laughed. "Oh. Didn't you understand that? Anything you want whether it is below or next door can be brought into the isolation chamber. You have full two-way communications ability if they are alive and conscious. And, when they are sent back the chamber automatically disinfects itself in a 30-second period of time."

She looked at Quimby Narz and then at Wiley Oswaldt and chuckled.

"Then I guess it's just the coffee thing. Take care of that by Monday as you promised and I think I can work here!"



## CHAPTER XV

### A MOST STRANGE FINDING

ANNE WAS is such a hurry on Monday that even Tommy had to question her.

"Golly, Momsie. Are you trying to get rid of us or something? You're in a real rush all of a sudden."

She laughed a little but her nerves came out as a slight shaking in her voice so she stopped. She coughed to clear her throat. "Well, yes and no, Tommy. It's just that I have so many, many things to do today and still get back to pick you up at school and Sandy at kindergarten. Now, you wouldn't want me to be late for that, would you?" She tousled his blond crew cut.

"Naw. I guess not," he told her smiling up at her.

Not wholly certain why, Anne leaned over and kissed her son on the top of his head. Her voice came out in a whisper. "I love you, Tommy Swift."

He looked curiously at her, but replied, "I love you too, Momsie!"

Twelve minutes later they left Sandy in the care of one of the teaching assistants and roared off to deliver Tommy to his school a half mile away. As he climbed out of the car, he turned to his mother.

"You have a good day, Momsie... and be careful."

That startled Anne so much that she nearly gasped. "Bu-but, Tommy, why did you say that?"

He shrugged. "Don't know. I just sort of thought I should say it. Bye!" With that he raced off to disappear through the front doors of the school building.

She got to the special parking space in front of the bank in time to see Wiley getting out of a battered old Jeep three spaces farther along. Unsure whether to acknowledge him, she busied herself pretending to put money in the meter. He walked right past her with a low, muttered, "Be there in ten," before he walked on past the bank.

Checking her watch, she saw it was just a few minutes until the bank would open and so she casually looked around the area. It was one of the older sections of Shopton that was slowly being rebuilt. She wasn't positive she approved of everything the town council had been doing. All she knew was it seemed to include more tearing down than revitalizing. Several of the old buildings had been deemed unsafe and had been torn down and replaced by more modern structures, while a few had been refaced outside and rebuilt inside.

The area was a miss-match of styles and building sizes that might be found in any older city starting to wake up to the fact that they need to grow and modernize.

The Merchants & Co. Bank was in one of the new buildings. All things considered it seemed slightly out of place for the rest of the street, but that was changing by the month.

She turned around on hearing the door lock click and saw the smiling face of the Asian FBI agent.

Inside and at the desk, she asked, "Since I am going to be a daily customer at times, can I know your name, or isn't that allowed?"

The other woman smiled, her eyes sparkling. "You may not believe this, but my name is also Anne. Anne Davis. My husband's last name, of course. I was born Tsu Lon Ang. I will have to call you Mrs. Swift in the bank, but I would be very pleased if you just call me Anne." She smiled again and the eyes glistened once more.

"Thank you, Anne. And, outside of work," she pointed around her, "if you see me, please also call *me* Anne."

She was feeling more relaxed by the time she reached the bottom of the stairs behind the safe deposit wall. The one thing she had forgotten was to hold her breath as she descended and got the full effects of the lavender mist in her throat and up her nose.

She would never be able to enjoy that scent ever again.

As she turned the doorknob and opened the lab she took a deep breath. This was the moment of truth. As she crossed the imaginary threshold she held her head high.

*I trained for this and wanted this more than anything, she thought to herself, until I realized that I wanted Damon and the children more. But, and her shoulders slumped as she came to a stop, I have so missed being in a lab.*

Behind her came a polite cough. She turned to see Agent Narz standing in the doorway.

"Good morning, Anne, and welcome to your very first case."

"Right. Hello, Agent Narz. So, I have to ask this, now that I am officially or unofficially working for you, do I just call you Agent Narz, or what?"

He laughed. "You are officially but *secretly* working for the FBI, not for me. I, like you, collect a paycheck and can be here one day and forced to depart the next. We are, if you will, colleagues. I am your handler, but not your boss. In fact, Anne, you are the boss here. You say you need something and I go get it if that is possible. Wiley Oswaldt even works under you."

She had a momentarily hard time coming to grips with that concept, but Wiley's voice said, "And, that is the way I want it, Annie. I have no ego in this." He stepped into the room. "We can't. Have egos, that is. And, we all know who is the superior scientist with the best training and the most intelligent here!" He winked at her.

"So," she said turning back to the FBI man. "I shall repeat the question, if you need me to—"

"Quimby is just fine," he interrupted her.

"Okay, Quimby," she said setting her purse on one of the three desks in the room, "what's first?"

They both ignored Wiley's muttered, "No, he's on second. Who's on first!"

"Okay. We ended up with five people here from Canada. The others were detoured to another facility of ours in the hopes that between us we can reach a faster conclusion to this."

He told them about the four men and one woman who had been installed in five of the isolation rooms next door. All five were suffering from something causing their salivary glands to constantly put out a high level of saliva. It was so constant that sleeping was nearly impossible and all had been placed in

induced comas with special self-sealing suction tubes down their throats.

The I.V. lines were just keeping up with the outflow. For now.

"They are getting their air down the same tube," he said.

"What about nourishment?"

Narz scowled. "Honestly? I have no idea. They all have those I.V. tubes in their arms but I suppose you need to check to see if they are getting the right stuff." He shrugged.

"Right," Anne said as she brushed past him. At the door she paused and asked, "Any hindrance to my going inside next door? Not to the individual rooms but to the larger area outside them?"

Quimby shook his head. "None. And the Registered Nurse attending them can answer your questions about what they are receiving. Plus, she doesn't have to wear the suit."

Anne entered the room, startling the nurse who was doing paperwork. She walked over, introduced herself and suggested the nurse continue what she was doing. As the young woman typed in more information, Anne marveled at two things. First, very few nurses she knew of were devastatingly beautiful; this one was. And, two, nearly all nurses who had more than four or five years in the business tended to be a bit on the heavy side. Nursing left very little time for good nutrition and finding time to eat was always a chore. Vending machines tended to become good friends as well as hated enemies.

The nurse, Bre Parries—who explained that her first name was like the cheese, but without the 'i' and the last pronounced almost like Paris—was pretty, shapely and evidently in great physical condition.

Anne peeked over her shoulder at the chart for the woman. She nodded and smiled on seeing exactly what the intubation setup was and what the patient was receiving. She patted the woman who was probably a year or so younger on the shoulder and said she would come back in an hour.

"Just call or enter what you need in your computer," Bre told her. "I see all requests and can either let them happen, like if you are calling for one of these people to come to your isolation

chamber, or I can override and send you reasons if I am in the process of working with them."

Anne thanked her and left.

"That's quite some setup next door," she mentioned as she took a seat. "So, Wiley. Since you have some experience with all this sort of thing, and also since it appears that Quimby rushed out of here the moment I turned my back, perhaps you can give me some protocols."

He smiled at her. "I can do more than that, Annie. I can show you how we start ordering samples from live patients and even how to call up one for direct study. It's a little different from handling corpses or other non-breathing samples from below."

In five minutes he had filled her in on having blood drawn from all the patients and getting it delivered in pre-labeled tubes or pipettes.

"So, how about if I want to begin with the woman?"

"Hit the number one button on the keyboard. That calls up the entire list of available people and things."

She did it and was presented with a list of the five Canadians along with a list of blood samples taken from the others who were now in an alternate facility.

"What in the world is that?" she asked, pointing at a small list at the bottom of the screen.

Wiley came over and peered at the list.

"It appears that we have some scrapings from inside the ship these people were on. See that one?" His right index finger hovered over the third item of the list. "That five digit code next to the name can be clicked on. Go ahead."

She did and a small window popped up on the screen.

"Oh. Wow. So, that came from cargo hold number one, forward of the center of the ship, and was a, hmmm, sort of dried black slime," she said reading the notes. "Ick. I'll take a look at that later. So, let's me ask our nurse to draw a sample of the woman's blood."

She typed a few commands and received a winking green indicator on the screen.

"Yes, Annie, that means she got the request and is getting ready to take it. In a few minutes that light will change to orange which says the sample is coming in. It will travel through the double vacuum-sealed tube and into the holding box over to your right."

By the time it arrived he had shown her how to withdraw small samples and send them to the five different areas and machines in the lab that were normally used with blood. Two sat to one side and the other three were arranged in a semicircle at his desk.

She saw that one of the smaller samples went to his station where he began peering at a single drop under a high-powered microscope. Rather than being hunched over the eye pieces, high-resolution cameras were mounted and displayed their images on a very fancy monitor. It was slightly out of alignment, or so Anne believed, until he passed her a small headset. She placed it on and looked. The images were nearly three-dimensional!

"Incredible!" she exclaimed.

He chuckled. "Yes, they are. And, as you can see as I zoom in on one thing, this scope can give you single cell views. Watch this little trick."

She did and was even more amazed when he switched through several alternate light ranges, each one revealing more details inside and outside the cells.

To Anne's eyes the cells looked fine. Perhaps slightly darker red than in some people, but if the woman would be receiving oxygen through her breathing tube that might account for it. When she asked Wiley what he thought, he pointed to the keyboard, "Ask her?" he suggested.

She sat back at her desk and typed:

**Bre? Is the female getting extra O2?**

The answer came back seconds later:

**No. Normal air. All getting same.**

She typed **Thankx** and turned back to Wiley. "Just plain old air. Well, you keep delving into those cell views while I do a little

spectro-analysis on one of my samples and then I may have to dissect a cell or two to see what is going on inside."

"And, I can help with that one," he offered. "Just say the word."

"The word," she replied with a small grin. "Turns out today is a half day at school. I have to bolt from here to get the kids in about eight minutes. Just enough time for one sample run."

She busied herself telling the appropriate equipment to remove a pipette's worth of blood from the largest of the vacuum tubes. It quickly disappeared from the sampling station and reappeared in the spectro-analysis device.

With little to do except watch—everything was highly automated in the lab—she sat back in her seat and looked at the control panel. There were many things she could do to override the functions, but she had been told to let the machines do their thing first and then make adjustments later.

Five minutes after calling up the small sample, the screen of the unit changed and showed her both an X-Y chart as well as a list of all discovered chemicals in the sample.

Everything looked to be normal, human blood with one exception. The chemical code **C20H25N3O** had a red dot next to it but it was something she did not recognize. She asked Wiley for his assistance.

"You run along to get your beautiful children," he told her, "and I will try to identify what that is."

She got up but stopped at the door. Turning she asked, "Wiley... how do *you* know my children are beautiful?"

He smiled broadly at her. "Because I know what a beautiful woman you are, I have met Damon, and the two of you could not create anything other than beautiful offspring!"

Anne smiled back and left the lab.

But, as she drove to Sandy's kindergarten she wondered. *How could Wiley have ever met Damon? I mean, his picture has been in the local newspaper, but Wiley lives closer to New York City. Hmmm?*

Anne was still bothered by this when Damon came in the front door at about six-forty. She hugged and kissed him—causing Sandy to make gagging noises and muttering "Yuck!"—before releasing him and suggesting they go into the kitchen.

Sensing she needed to either say or ask something, he followed along telling Tommy and Sandy to behave.

"What is it?" he asked once the door was closed.

Anne suddenly found herself mentally backing into a corner. How could she ask anything about Wiley Oswaldt without having to answer uncomfortable questions. But, she went ahead and asked, "Dear? Do you know Dr. Wiley Oswaldt?"

He thought a second and then nodded. "Sure. From your old school next to MIT, right?"

"Right," she said slowly.

"Why do you ask?"

An inspiration hit her. "I was talking to one of the teachers at Tommy's school who had a Brooklyn paper on her desk. I saw Wiley's picture and a small article about his having retired from teaching."

"Oh. I remember you mentioning what a wonderful man he was... or rather is. And, just to close this loop you introduced us one day when I picked you up at that basement lab you both sequestered yourselves in. Remember? We had tickets to a Boston Pops afternoon concert across the river and I couldn't pry you loose in time?"

Okay, now she recalled the incident. It had been a point of guilt on her part for weeks. How could she have forgotten that?

"How in the world could you have forgotten that?" he asked.

"I honestly don't know unless it was the sheer guilt of ruining your one afternoon off in a couple months. Sorry."

He pulled her to him and kissed her. "Nothing to be sorry for. I just hope Dr. Oswaldt finds things to do as a retiree. As it is, I'm starting to worry about my dad. Once I took over the company he's been sitting and reading a lot, and I'm afraid he has also been drinking."



"Oh, my!"

"Nothing to worry about, yet, but I wish I could find something for him. Obviously not at the company; that would be too much of an insult. But, keep your ears open. Perhaps one of those teachers you gab with knows of something."

The subject was dropped as Sandy marched through the door, slamming it a little harder than she had intended to, into the kitchen counter.

Damon reached out planting his right hand on his daughter's head and turned her around, giving her a small swat to propel her back out the door.

"You two wash up for dinner. Your mother has what smells to be tuna noodle casserole coming out of the oven in three minutes. March!"

They peeked out the kitchen door in time to see Tommy take his sister by the hand and lead her up the stairs.

"Come on, San. I'll race ya to see who gets their hands clean the fastest!"

She gave a little squeal and ran up the last five steps and down the hall.

After dinner Tommy helped his mother clear the table while Sandy climbed into her father's lap and, in a very serious tone, asked how his day had been.

Equally as serious he told her that he had personally okayed a preliminary design for a small aircraft he hoped to begin building in about three or four years.

"Not certain what we're going to call it, sweetheart, but maybe in a couple years you can help with that. I think it needs to be some sort of bird name. Birds fly and I presume our planes will fly as well."

"Dodo," she said naming the extinct bird she had only learned about that morning.

"Maybe," he told her as Anne and Tom came into the living room.

The next morning Anne repeated the drop off chores and

headed for the lab. Wiley had opted to not sleep on one of the bunks and had gone to the Shopton Hotel where he would stay most nights while working on a case.

On her desk she found a single piece of paper with a note:

**C20 H25 N3O = LSD !!! ???**

LSD, a hardcore drug. It made Anne shudder.

"And, your next question," Wiley asked as he came in, "should be 'how did she and the others get LSD in their systems?' Then, if I taught you as well as I hope I did, you will be asking 'why' and also 'was it voluntarily or an accidental exposure.' I suppose we may need to wake one or more of them to find that out."

She nodded. "Just about in the same order as well. Good morning, Wiley. Hope you had a nice night."

He took several folders from his briefcase and laid them on his desk. "Yep! I feel young again. Like a veritable teenager without the pimples and crazy hormones. And you?"

She told him about her asking Damon if they knew each other. Then, she apologized for having any suspicious thoughts."

"Oh, Annie Douglas, or I mean Swift. Perhaps before we get down to business this morning I ought to fill you in on the rather interesting life of a wonderful girl and tremendous woman. Let me get us some coffee and then prepare to hear incredible things."

Over the following hour he told her about the Government program to identify exceptional talent and to foster those kids through the highest level of schooling they wanted to attain.

"So, all the free rides, all the encouragement and all the special opportunities were just to see if I could be made, eventually of course, into a super secret FBI scientist?" she asked incredulously but with no anger.

Wiley nodded. "And here you are, the best of the best of the best. And, you deserve every accolade and every chance you've ever been given!"

## CHAPTER XVI

### THE SALIVARY SEPSIS SYNDROME

"ANAPHYLAXIS?" was Anne's first thought after a full review of every aspect of the case and the detailed notes from the Canadian hospital. The acute allergic reaction to something such as peanuts or a bee sting could make the tongue and throat swell to the point where the sufferer could strangle to death. She shook her head at the idea.

There was some sign of swelling of the throat and tongue before the patients had been placed in a deep sleep and their throats blocked to keep them from choking, but nothing like an anaphylactic reaction.

She had the nurse wake the female patient and then delivered to the isolation booth. Given the type and amount of drugs being used, this was accomplished fairly quickly. Once there, Anne asked the woman to signal if she could understand what was being said. She nodded. Using the Waldoes Anne pulled off the oxygen mask that had been placed on her once the air tube and the saliva sucking tubes were out; the woman had a small coughing fit.

From a small side door a bottle of water was delivered which the woman acknowledged with another nod, rolled onto her right side and then drained the entire thing.

"Thirsty as all get out!" she proclaimed in a croaky voice.

"Okay. I'll have another one sent in after a few minutes of letting that one settle. I don't want you vomiting right now. In the meantime, I have a couple questions. Anything you think that can be answered yes or no, just nod or shake you head. But, there will be some times I need full and frank answers from you. Ready?" Nod. "Fine. What in the world were you folks carrying in that ship?"

The woman shrugged. Then, she thought to add, "Not on the ship."

"Wait. You weren't on that ship?" Shake. "You weren't one of

the crew?" Another shake. "But, you weren't one of the fire or rescue people either, were you?" Shake, but her eyes lowered telling Anne she was keeping something back.

Wiley leaned over and whispered in Anne's ear. "Oh. Are you a local up there?" A very reluctant nod. "Were you and some other locals trying to see what you might find in that grounded ship?"

"Yeah," the woman croaked. "Alls we found was some green slime stuff that got all over our hands and clothes. We got off the ship but everything went wack-a-doo and I passed out."

"Did you see anyone from the ship?"

The woman sniffled and asked for more water. She got another bottle and also drained that. All the time she had been speaking with Anne she hadn't drooled at all. Anne made a mental note to have the nurse next door check on the others.

"I'm afraid I don't know your name. Can you please tell me?"

"Marcy Darlton."

"Ah. As in U.S. President Clarke Abraham Darlton?"

Marcy nodded but looked almost ashamed to be admitting to the family connection. "I guess that's what his side of the family is doing these days. Politics! Not honest farming."

Anne smothered the thought of asking Marcy if attempted looting of a stricken ship was part of honest farming.

"Where was this slime you touched? Oh, and did everyone with you also touch it?"

"We opened a door marked 'Hold Access' and went down some stairs. It was all down there. And, yeah, we all stuck fingers in it. Got some on our feet, too. Wasn't wearing shoes 'cause we din't want to get them all dirty."

There wasn't much more she could get from the woman, but just knowing there was most probably something in that ship causing the illnesses gave her another avenue to explore. She thanked Marcy and told her she could go back to her room.

"No tubes?" the woman almost pleaded.

"Just as long as the saliva drainage is stopped or close to

normal," Anne promised.

"That should preclude looking too deeply for a simple food allergy problem," Wiley stated as the woman disappeared through a door that had just opened in the wall of the chamber. "It would mean the entire crew had such a reaction, and the odds against that size of group having that sort of reaction to a food is ridiculous. Odd about the stuff she calls slime, though."

The information they got from Marcy did not, however, rule out some sort of airborne substance.

Or, insect bites or even rat-borne diseases. More than one epidemic had been the result of transfer of bacteria or viruses by such means.

She made a quick note to follow upon research into things such as malaria, dengue fever, Japanese Encephalitis type-B, sleeping sickness and even plague.

But first, she asked the nurse to check to salivary drainage conditions of the other four, gave instructions to allow Marcy to not be sedated again or intubated, and requested samples of everyone's saliva be sent through.

Next, Anne called up several research sites on her computer to look into chemical warfare agents and their symptoms. By the time she had to leave to get the kids, she had found nothing with similar reactions in humans or any living mammal.

The next morning she began searching through germ warfare agents. The more she read, the more alarmed she became at the sheer number of germ agents that had been used over the years. Certainly, she had studied germ and chemical warfare agents at college and could spot a number of them under a powerful microscope—or at least the results of them—but nothing like the information she now had at her beck and call.

There were many videos available of experiments on mice and rats, monkeys and even on a horse, but she refused to subject herself to them. It was plenty for her to digest and come to grips with just reading about what had occurred in the test subjects.

Most of it made her stomach turn.

About an hour before she needed to leave, Wiley came into the lab. He had worked late, stayed the previous night, and slept in one of the bunks down the hall and gone down to take a short nap.

"Good afternoon, Annie," he said but his face showed that he was feeling anything other than good. He was trying to bend and twist his head to loosen it.

"You should sit down, Wiley, and let me rub your shoulders. You look as though you took that nap in a closet and had to maneuver yourself around something."

He snorted. "It felt like an old mop, a push broom and a pail nobody had the decency to empty all sitting under me. Those bunks are terrible!" He sat down rolling his head around. There was a slight popping sound as one of his vertebrae realigned itself and the fluid sac between it and the next one snapped back into position.

She rubbed his shoulders and neck finding at least three kinked muscle groups which she beat into submission with the edges of her hands. Next, she moved down the spine to the middle of his back and found another knotted mass. This she had to push, poke and eventually get her elbows involved in loosening.

Ten minutes later he called a halt.

"My poor old body thanks you and officially surrenders. I will tell you anything you wish to know. Only, please stop the torture!" he said kiddingly.

"Okay, but I want you down on the floor on your back for five minutes to straighten it out, hear?"

He nodded and smiled. The pain in his neck was nearly gone.

She helped him get down to the floor and even bundled her jacket for a makeshift pillow. As he tried to relax his back muscles, she filled him in on her research.

"Very nasty stuff indeed," he commented when she had finished. He held a hand up and she came over to help him get up. "The back feels much better. Thank you, Annie. You are better than a Chiropractor."

"I charge a whole lot less and actually get results, to boot! What do you think of my angle of research? Am I way off and ought to be looking into something else?"

He massaged his right forearm with his left hand. "Hmmm. Well, if I had been awake I would have suggested ignoring the chemical and germ warfare stuff. All in all, those are meant to lead to death, not uncontrollable drooling and the cracking of the skin. But, other than that I would say you are going down the right path. Check everything and set aside what it is not right and you will eventually get to the only thing you cannot discount. That may not be the answer but I'll bet it will lead to one."

"Skin cracking?" she asked now slightly alarmed.

"Sure. Last night I had one of the men brought in and gave his entire body a close-up exam. The fingertips and elbows are as thick and tough as a heel callus on someone who walks around barefoot all the time. Same with his toes and even the arches. Here. Let me show you some photos I took."

Anne moaned causing Wiley to turn to look at her. "What?" he asked, now concerned.

"Some researcher I am. I had the woman in here, awake and everything, and all I did was talk to her. I could have spent some time examining her before I even woke her. Maybe I really don't belong here."

"Nonsense! It will take a few of these cases to get you into what we used to call the groove of things. Nobody can write up a checklist for what we do and nobody, least of all me, expects you to have all bases covered each and every time. Now, so saying that I think we need to examine them all for this skin thickening. Also, those areas are drying out and that is causing the cracking."

He brought up fifteen pictures he had taken the evening before. Each one showed the thick, slightly yellowing skin with everything from microscopic separations and fractures to outright tears a millimeter or more wide and deep.

"Did you get samples of the skin?" she asked causing him to blush.

"Oops! See what I mean? Good thing we are working this together. Let's see what we can find out if we do this correctly."

Anne ordered that each of the patients be sent in, one at a time. She began with Marcy Darlton.

"Hello again, Marcy. This fine gentleman with me is another doctor, and we are working together on this. Now, I need to get a few small skin samples from you. Nothing that will actually hurt, but you might be a little uncomfortable. Would you like me to sedate you for this?"

Marcy shook her head. Her voice, now much clearer, came over the speakers. "No! I'm a farmer and I can take a lot of pain before I cry. Do what you got to do and then I think I need a nap. And, hi, mister Doctor whatever your name was. Sorry, but I'm having trouble concentrating right now."

"Hello, young lady. I am Doctor Dailey, but people call me Bill," Wiley introduced himself using what Anne realized would be his FBI code name. He described the locations they needed samples from and told her that if she felt uncomfortable he could leave the room.

She told them it was fine unless they needed something from an intimate place.

Fifteen minutes later Anne had the samples, sent Marcy back for her nap and was waiting for the first man to come through. She noted that he no longer had the intubation tubes in his mouth and throat, just a pair of I.V. lines.

"So, good, old Doc Bill Daily," she said with a hint of question in her tone.

"Be certain you spell the last name with an e-y," he told her. "And, yes. I figure that physicians front offices are pretty quick on the whole billing aspect of the business, hence—"

Anne's mouth scrunched up a little, "They let you pick your code name?"

He nodded. "It was many years ago, you know."

She was going to have to have another conversation with Quimby Narz about her Barbara Boone moniker.



In less than another hour she had all the patients samples and was about to start examining them when she realized she was going to be late picking up her kids.

"Go. Like the proverbial wind, Annie. I shall prepare the slides and everything before I leave and we shall dig deeper tomorrow. Now, scoot!"

She was only three minutes late for Sandy and five for Tommy because Sandy decided to cross her arms and pout over her mother being even a few seconds late which made buckling her in difficult.

*I'm not so certain this is all going to work out, she thought. I can only give this about five to six hours a day and it just isn't fair to Wiley or the people in those rooms. Damn!*

But, the next morning she was at the bank right on time and raced down the stairs.

Wiley pointed to the steaming cup of coffee, this one in a paper cup from the little place down the street from the bank, and then to her computer screen.

"Have a few soothing and refreshing sips of that and then turn the monitor on. I've sent you detailed photos of the skin samples so you can compare some of them side-by-side."

She picked up the cup after dropping her purse in the lower desk drawer and took a taste. It was easily twice as good as the coffee down the hall, something she mentioned to her workmate.

"That is because I am convinced that all of the food, and the coffee especially, must be World War I surplus. Or, possibly the Revolutionary War. Nothing even a century old can taste that bland and that stale! That is supposed to be the replacement grounds, too."

"Have we seen Quimby at all?" she inquired.

"Nope. But that is not unusual. Anyway, forget the food and feted drinks and take a look at my nice pictures."

She pressed the power button and saw that several dozen photographs were arranged in a stack on her desktop. The top one, labeled with Marcy's code, indicated it was from her right

thumb.

It was fascinating.

The sample was three layers thick with all three comprised of dead cells—as she expected—but nearly every visible skin cell looked as if a tiny jagged-edged knife had been drawn across it.

She looked over to Wiley who shrugged back. "Mostly the same for outer cells except for the third male... ummm, Robert. Only his left hand fingers and palm seem to have been affected."

Anne pondered this a moment. "Is he left-handed and the others right-handed? That might explain the why of his clear right hand."

Wiley got a big grin on his face. "Ahh. That must be why they pay you the big bucks, Annie. I checked, and he is indeed a lefty. He also has some residual nerve damage from a farming accident a decade ago that makes his right arm partially paralyzed."

"So, if we take Marcy's story of the green slime on the walls and floors of the cargo hold and the human nature to touch things that gives up four right-handers touching and then possibly wiping their hands together to get the stuff off and one man who can only use his left hand."

It made some level of sense, but it was only an educated theory based on partial evidence.

"Do we have any samples of that slime hydrated?" she asked.

When Wiley checked his list and shook his head, she felt a shiver run down her spine. "Just the small dry scraping."

"Rats! We need several from a few places around that hold and also swabs of other walls throughout the ship. Is there a procedure for requesting those?"

"Everything like that generally goes through our Mr. Narz. Want me to call him?"

"No. I'll do it. I only hope the answer is not, 'Well, why don't *you* go up there and do it.' " She explained about her experience in Louisiana with the rogue police officer and the shots fired into her motel room.

She finished with the declaration that she detested the idea of ever doing any field work again.

In the end, she made the call. As she would discover was normal, she dialed his special number, heard a series of pips and then had to record a message. The phone on her desk rang less than thirty-seconds later.

"It's Quimby," he told her. "I'm not certain I fully understand the request so I'll be in there in twenty minutes. Bye!" and the phone connection went dead.

"You should have told him to stop by a store and pick up some coffee grown in this millennia," Wiley stated with a wry grin.

While they waited Anne ordered up one of the saliva samples and had a slide prepared of a minute amount of it. It soon appeared under the lens of her microscope.

"Oh. Wiley? Come take a look, please."

He slid his chair over and stopped next to her. Pulling a pair of glasses from his shirt pocket he leaned forward.

"Hmmm. That looks like the beginning of a slight infection. When was that sample taken?"

"As soon as they came in. Let me get the latest sample." Two minutes later they were looking at a sample form about 24-hours earlier.

"And, it has gotten much worse," Wiley observed. "Normally I would suggest checking all samples, but since we have five people with very similar exposure and symptoms, I'd say we need to delve more deeply into their blood samples and ID that infection."

He was about to say something more when they both heard the lab door open.

"Good morning, all," Quimby said in a tone that said he was unsure if that was an accurate assessment. "Tell me what I can do."

The two doctors swung around to face their FBI man.

Anne spoke for them both. "We have an almost definite

exposure to something very nasty inside that ship. Unfortunately, nobody up in Canada took any samples of anything, and we need them post haste. Also, their clothing should not have been incinerated as the notes say they were. It makes finding out anything other than what the symptoms are very difficult."

Narz nodded and made a short note in the small book he took from his jacket pocket. "I see. What sort of samples and from where. Exactly, I mean."

Anne explained about Marcy Darlton's admission of the group having entered the forward hold and encountered the wall slime.

"First and foremost, we need a proper, uncontaminated sample of that. As much as about sixty CCs of it." When she noted his blank look, she added, "That's just over two fluid ounces, Quimby. Whoever enters the ship need to be wearing a full isolation suit including its own air supply. Stress that. Otherwise we'll end up with more patients."

She could see the discomfort on his face.

"What?"

"Well, we do have more patients. The Mounties up there sort of didn't get the complete idea of keeping others out at all times. A few let their families come out to see what they are guarding and some of the children got on board."

Anne's eye narrowed. "How many?"

Sensing he was in for a dose of Anne Swift wrath, Narz gulped. "Nine. Five kids and four adults."

She shook her head sadly. "Okay. Find out if that is the sum total of the kids who went on that ship, find out exactly where they went once on it and what they remember touching. Then, and this is really important, find out if the four adults then wiped off anything like the slime from the kids' hands, faces or wherever. All of that ASAP."

"It's giong to take some time—" he began but Anne and Wiley both shouted:

"Now! Today!" Anne added, "You know I have limited time

each day and this absolutely needs to be done in the next hour. No more. Lives are going to depend on it. Stress that to our neighbors to the North and tell those Mounties that they are liable for any additional exposure, as in legally and morally liable with a big hunk of prison time if they slack off again!"

Quimby had been furiously writing things in his notebook. Now he read his notes back and Anne and Wiley nodded.

"Gotta run on this," Narz told them as he bolted for the door, pulling his cell phone out as he headed out.

"I do believe you have put a level of fear into Quimby Narz, Anne. Good job."

"Thanks, but lets get to work on more samples."

She typed in some orders and received a light of agreement. As all previous samples were stored in a vault beneath them, it was only a matter of a minute before the receiving box began getting the first of them. These were the samples taken from the patient they knew of as Robert, both his saliva and blood, taken every eight hours since his arrival.

Anne took charge of the saliva and let Wiley take the blood, It was his specialty and they both knew he was the one to delve into that.

Robert's saliva samples showed a progression from a mild infection to what was, as of a sample taken one hour previously, a somewhat severe one.

It was the same with all the other patients' samples; after nearly a week from initial exposure to today, each of them had progressed from mild to severe infections.

She told Wiley about his.

Wiley looked up from his own microscope's monitor. "This is not good," he said gravely. He had been peering at Robert's latest blood sample. "There is every indication that sepsis is setting in with our patients. We absolutely need to know what the root cause is before we can treat them successfully. If we don't, I'm afraid we might lose our guests!"



## CHAPTER XVII

### ANOTHER SURPRISE

"SEPSIS?" she nearly shouted. "Sepsis? Good God!" she said somewhat more subdued.

She knew this meant a potentially life-threatening complication from the infection. Chemicals and white blood cells were being released into the patients' bloodstreams to fight the infection at a very high rate, and this was triggering an inflammatory responses throughout their bodies. This inflammation could eventually trigger a cascade of changes that had potential to damage multiple organ systems, causing them to fail.

The dehydration caused by the incessant drooling over several days had the ability to accelerate the damage.

If the sepsis was allowed to progress it might become septic shock, which may lead to death. In the five reported deaths, she now believed they would have perished from such septic shock.

What in the world could that slime contain to cause all this?

"We've got to get all of them on a spectrum of antibiotics and force the I.V. fluids into them. Even at a high level like when they were drooling themselves into dehydration," she said as she typed the new orders.

Anne didn't even bother to watch for the green light. She knew the nurse—someone new today and not Bre Parries—would get right on the task. All the assigned nurses were equally competent and her orders would be carried out within minutes.

"What are you giving them along with their water?" Wiley inquired.

"Tombamycin along with Cefotaxime and that new Savitaxifen. I want as wide a coverage as I think they can tolerate. If they react positively by tonight I will have already written the prescription to be sent to the other lab and up to the hospital or hospitals in Canada."

They continued examining all the samples finding exactly

what they now expected. One thing they did not expect was having their current nurse phone in requesting that one of them come next door.

"Can you take that, Annie? I want to prep a sample of blood to put in our shiny refurbished electron microscope."

"Sure. I need to stretch, anyway," she replied heading for the door. She walked down the hall, punched in a code allowing her to open the safety door, and stepped inside. She introduced herself to a plump, older nurse named Nancy Sharp who caused her to think to herself, *Ah, now that's what I think of when I picture a middle-aged RN!*

"What can I do for you, Dr. Swift? I've sent in the orders to include those three meds in their I.V.s. Per your orders fluids are to be pushed in as fast as possible. Everyone should have everything in them in about seven more minutes."

"Thank you, Nancy. That's wonderful news. I wanted to come in and let you know what we believe we might be up against and to request some new tissue samples. I thought it better to tell you directly rather than try to type it all in."

She described the need for a repeat of most of the skin samples from as near the same areas as possible along with her desire to get right-side hepatic ductal samples.

"Oh," Nancy relied. "I'll have to sedate them again to get those liver samples for you. Mucho discomfort otherwise. Now before I forget, and I've been trying to get some measurements before I told you anything, I think the skin cracking is spreading. Not a lot; in fact maybe only a few millimeters, but the bottom of James Duggand's right foot was sticking out from his covers and it just looked slightly wider than it had evening before last when I was on duty."

Anne sighed. "Okay. Once they've had, oh, half an hour with the antibiotics in them go ahead and sedate them and get those liver samples. We can apologize to them after they wake up with a sore spot. Then, make those measurements and get me the results. Oh, wait," she said looking at the clock on the far wall. "I'll be leaving in about two hours and—" she paused, "No, go ahead with the samples and measurements. I'll concentrate on the ductal tissues first and see if the rate of spread on the skin



warrants asking Doctor Oswaldt to stay late. Again." She smiled weakly at the nurse before turning and leaving the large room.

As the door to the lab clicked shut behind her; Anne had to lean back and catch her breath. It wasn't that she had exerted herself, but about ten times a day since this project began she found herself holding her breath until she nearly saw spots in front of her eyes.

This was one of those moment.

The outward symptoms were odd, to say the very least. The drooling, cracked and obviously necrotic—dead—skin tissues, and even the growing sepsis within their bodies hopefully being held at bay by some of the best antibiotics available, including the new one not yet on the market, but available to them.

Taking a deep breath she walked to her desk and sat down. There would be at least an hour before the liver samples would be available to her. Without a lot of samples from the point of infection, or at least the assumed point, there was precious little to look at outside of what the patients brought in, namely their own bodies.

Wiley was concentrating on something he had visible on his monitor. It would be something under his microscope and like anything else it might be something important.

"May I slide over and see what you're doing?" she inquired picking up her 3D glasses.

He looked over and smiled. "Any time I can get a pretty young woman to ask if she can come over next to me I have to say absolutely yes. Slide, shuffle or sidle on over, Annie."

Anne gave a small push with her legs and her chair rolled toward him. As soon as she stopped her eyes were searching the monitor for a clue to what it was displaying.

"What we are looking at is a tiny piece of something I discovered under the thumbnail of our fourth male patient, the one named Jeremy. He is also the worst off of the five of them. I have just asked the nurse give him a slightly larger dose of the antibiotics to see if we can get ahead of the sepsis."

He caused the slide to move around under the lens. Everywhere they looked the speck showed all the properties of

dried seaweed.

"Can we rehydrate it?" she asked.

Wiley chuckled. "This was rehydrated. In the hour and..." he checked his watch, "fifty minutes since I added a single drop of sterile water it went from flat and dry to plump and moist and back again."

"Huh? No sample should dry out that quickly," she said, alarm rising in her tone.

He chuckled again. "Well, now if this were all out in the open I would agree with you, but I forgot that between all of these fine pieces of equipment we may use, every sample travels in a square tube—if there can be such a thing—in a *vacuum*. Put something wet in vacuum and you know what you get."

"Oh. The vacuum causes moisture to boil out at very low temperatures." Now she laughed. "I guess being away from school and the very basic stuff for a few years is making both our brains soft."

"Yes. But I have a solution. We have a microscope on an armature inside our lovely isolation chamber. I'm having a second slide prepped and sent there. It will not have to undergo the vacuum so we shall see a perfectly pump specimen. Or, rather you shall see it. I have already, and I will value your unbiased observations."

When Anne took a look she got a frustrated look on her face. "That's algae," she said. "I suppose that is the same stuff our guest Marcy described as green slime."

"That concurs with my assumption as well. Do you have any ideas where to go with this?"

Anne shook her head. "Other than taking that tiny bit and killing it in the electron microscope. I honestly don't think we have enough for the spectro-analyser and certainly not enough for both. But, I don't see how getting a closer look at the cells will help. My guess is it is like the dried sample we have. Perhaps I ought to try to get that tiny sample to divide and grow. Send it to the incubation unit and I'll get a petri dish ready. Wish I knew what algae really liked for dinner."

"I can help there," Wiley told her. "Seawater algae, and I

think we have to assume this is one of those as it came from an ocean-going ship, loves seawater with its yummy calcium, potassium, sodium—of course—and magnesium. Now, we could try to make it, but there is an aquarium store just two blocks away from our bank upstairs. I suppose one of us could just go purchase some make-it-yourself seawater. It must be one of those just add water sort of things."

Anne had to smile. Wiley had said that just as he might explain the glaringly obvious to a somewhat dull-witted student. She knew he wasn't having a jab at her; it was more of a joke.

"Golly gosh, Doctor Oswaldt. Do we need any special equipment to make it in? Like a bucket?"

"Okay, Annie. You got me. Sorry if I offended."

She gave him a friendly smooch on his cheek. "No offense taken. I could use a breath of fresh air, so I'll go."

The store was Shopton's only aquarium supply store, but not having one at home she had never found an excuse to enter. Her eyes went immediately to the incredible array of colors in the various small and large tanks of fish.

"Help you, ma'am?" a boy with long hair and pierced septum asked.

"Well, I was asked by a friend to pick up a box or bag of seawater, uh, salts."

"Mmmmm. How big?"

"Pardon?"

"The tank. How many gallons is it?" He seemed to be more put out than curious.

Anne took a guess. "Fifty gallons, and don't ask me what fish he has. Blue, yellow and something that looks like a small shark," she told him looking over his shoulder at three tanks behind him.

"Mmmmm. 'kay." He turned and walked away returning half a minute later. He had a box of something called "Ocean In An Hour" held out to her.

"If he has had the tank for a while, he'll know what to do. If not he needs to add this to warm water, wait one hour and then

some more until the temperature goes down to about eighty. Then, he'll run his air stone full out for twenty-four hours then put his shark in for a week and then introduce the others. He'll know what introduce means. That'll be twenty-eight-ninety-five."

She thanked him and took her purchase back to the bank. Her new friend, Anne, looked puzzled at the box but said nothing as she let Anne back into the lab via the vault.

Of course she had no idea how little to use to supplement a petri dish so she performed a small amount of research. It turned out that about eleven grains of the dry chemicals and salts in a tablespoon of fresh water would be about right.

Now she dithered a little before asking Wiley if he would suggest going with a little too much or too little.

"As my Nona told me while I was growing up, 'Wilbert, you can always add more salt but you can't take it back out.' And, please do not use that name. Only my grandmother was allowed. It might be my true name but I have hated it since I could understand it."

"Not to worry. You will always be Wiley to me." She went to the small sink she had and poured out her first solution. She cut the granules by half and added more water, poured it into a small vial and gave it a good shake. Then she placed it in a small compartment and watched as it was taken away. It would be added to the petri dish into which Wiley's tiny algae bit would be placed.

"I guess we'll know in twenty-four hours if we have been able to multiply it," she said. "Anything else for me? I'm about to get some hepatic samples and I'd like us to both take a look at them."

"Three minutes and I'm all yours," her promised.

Her computer announced the arrival of the hepatic samples and she hurriedly called them all up.

When she viewed the first of the liver samples—taken from their lone female patient—Anne felt a wave of shock and surprise pass through her brain. Unless something was happening at the DNA level, there was no indication that

anything was abnormal with the woman's liver, assuming that Marcy had already been diagnosed with a fatty liver condition.

She turned to Wiley. "Can I send this to you? I think I need your eyes looking at what we've got. It's the first of the liver samples."

"What's going on?" he inquired.

"Oh, other than more fat than I think a young woman ought to have in her liver, the sample looks remarkable clean. I'm just worried that there may be something going on causing the fattiness. None of it looks particularly old."

"Well then, send it over. I'm nearly finished with this latest stuff. And, isn't it about time for you to skedaddle off to get the kids?"

She looked at her watch before answering. "Oh, I can stay another ten minutes if it'll mean getting your opinion on this slide. The others will need to wait until tomorrow."

"Not if I can help it, Annie. Send me everything. I still have several hours of daylight to work in, if you get what I mean." She thanked him and pressed the command in for all liver samples to be delivered into his "in box."

She stood up and slowly walked over to the large window of the isolation chamber. As her gaze wandered over all the equipment inside—pieces of which would never be allowed out of the chamber, even when thoroughly disinfected—she felt a little sad. *So much to use and so little for us to use in on*, she thought.

Her rumination was interrupted by Wiley. "It's not a lot, but I am seeing indications of cell damage in these fat cells. That is absolutely not a good thing."

"Oh my!" she replied. "Should we be attempting to flush their livers with Orlistat and even more of the saline?"

The medication was a bit of a last resort for people with advanced fatty liver syndrome, but had the ability to dissolve much of the deposits and to give many people several years of additional use of their own organ before a transplant might be mandated. Marcy's liver was not at that advanced state, but with few drug available, it was about their only choice.

"First I think I need to question her. If this is alcohol induced, then getting her off the sauce should go a goodly way to clearing this. If she isn't a long time heavy drinker, then I'd actually like to try a three-day course of milk thistle. It might be one of those old wives' tale cures, but I have two friends who used it and their early-stage fatty liver disease got better. No real cure, but a way to sort of give the old flabby, brown organ a bit of a scrubbing."

"Well, do what you think is best and I'll be back tomorrow," she told him.

Even before she reached Sandy's kindergarten her phone was ringing. She pulled over to the side of the street and answered it.

"Yes, Quimby? This better be good; I'm on my way to pick up my children."

"It is, Anne. We received permission from the Canadian government for you to head north tomorrow. You will be fully outfitted with all necessary and state-of-the-art protective gear. Since you've crabbed about the lack of good sample taken by the Mounties, I thought it best to accelerate this whole thing and let you go get exactly what you require."

Anne paused for a moment. "I may not have mentioned this enough to you, Agent Narz, but I hate, hate, hate field work! So much so that I might just quit right this minute."

"I hope your sense of doing what is right will not let you do that. Anyway, ostensibly you will be heading down to Albany to spend a couple days with an old friend, Daina Patterson, from your days at Cal Berkeley." He quickly described her cover story to relate to Damon and the procedure for the following morning.

As she got ready to hang up and pull away from the curb, she told him, "You are a real bastard, Quimby Narz. I hope you know that."

She heard him sigh. "Yeah, I get that a lot."

## CHAPTER XVIII

### "I HATE THE FIELD!"

"YOU REALLY need to go to your friend's in Albany?" Damon asked Anne as she was packing a light travel case that evening. "I know you've kept up a little over the years, but..."

"Daina was a good friend to me out in California, sweetheart, and now that she's been diagnosed with breast cancer I can tell she is in deep need of a friendly face and a shoulder to cry on for a couple days. I promise I'll call you every night I'm gone. And, I really don't intend that to be more than two nights, anyway."

Anne felt miserable inside. She detested lies—except those little ones meant to help keep children safe or from getting into trouble—and especially lies told between wife and husband. But, there was no getting around the need for her to head to Canada

The samples the Canadian team had managed to collect were woefully inadequate in spite of precise instructions.

Harlan Ames at the renamed Swift Aerospace would arrange for her car and a special cell phone to be delivered to an address in Albany within two hours of her departure. The phone would automatically forward before the first ring to her own phone so she could answer any calls from Damon and make her own with nobody the wiser to her true location.

She felt his strong arms encircle her waist and she smiled, turning around to face him and planting a loving kiss on his lips.

"She needs me, Damon. After that miserable jerk she married found out about the cancer he headed straight for the door. Good riddance she tells me, but she now has almost no support group. They only moved to Albany a couple months ago so she hasn't had time to make any close friends."

"I know," he told her hugging her tightly. "And, I would hope that you have friends like you and a support group should anything happen to you. I know it won't, but it is nice to be reminded of what a wonderful person you are, Anne. Also, I hope you know I would never leave you."

They slept wrapped in each others arms that night and she rose at about six, showered, dressed and kissed his still sleeping cheek before leaving to do the same to the children.

Her car, a new extended-range electric runabout, was almost silent as it rolled out of the driveway and down the street. Five blocks away she was met by Quimby Narz in his minivan where another woman got out—someone with hair or at least a wig that made her look a bit like Anne—and climbed into the smaller car.

She drove off heading in the general direction of the highway seven miles distant while Quimby and Anne headed for the Shopton airport and a waiting helicopter that whisked her up and north.

Quimby was not on the flight but during their eleven-minute drive he had filled her in on what to expect.

"We finally drilled in into their heads that all Mounties have to be fully protected at all times they come within one mile of the ship. Turns out they were told by their local commander that as long as they were at least a hundred feet from the ship, they could go around in their standard work uniforms." He rolled his eyes.

Two hours later the helicopter lost altitude and began a slow circle of the land below. As she shrugged into her protective gear, Anne looked out and down. She could see in the early morning light the ship which seemed more as if it had docked—it was pretty close to fully upright—rather than having rammed into the ground. She also saw the old runways of the dirt airport to the west. It was there the helo headed and touched down a minute later.

"Agent Boone?" the pilot said. "This is where you get off. There is a jeep you can see straight ahead. Keys are in it plus your supplies. It will be fully disinfected once this is over so don't hesitate to park as close to that ship as you need. Oh, and if you do need to travel outside the cordoned off area, come back here and give her a good dousing with the nozzle from that tank next to the old trailer home. It'll kill anything including you if you get too much on you."

"How about on the suit?" she asked.



"It'll self-dry in two minutes. Safe after that. Good luck and call when you need to go home. I'll be about twenty minutes away including warm-up!"

He reached over and shook her hand as she flipped her hood up and sealed the neckline shut. The small rebreather backpack she wore would provide ten full hours of air before she needed to retreat to the airport and swap out to a new cartridge and O2 tank.

She got out and waved as the helo rose and turned to the southwest.

"Okay my girl," she muttered, "time to put aside deep feelings of dread and hatred of field work and go to that ship."

Climbing into the jeep she saw the pilot had been correct; the keys were in the ignition. A quick turn and the small 4-cylinder engine roared to life. A half minute later she was turning right onto the small dirt road that would lead around to the ship.

About three-hundred feet before she arrived she encountered five Mounties wearing only parts of their protective gear. One was even standing there without his respirator.

She stopped.

"Closed area. Turn around and leave," the unmasked man told her.

"I'm FBI agent Barbara Boone," she replied tugging out her ID packet and handing it to him. As she did she noted a small streak of drool coming down from the left side of his mouth.

He checked it and handed it back to her. "Yeah, fine. Go on," he instructed.

"Do you realize that you have become infected?" she asked him. "Not wearing your protective gear, all of you, has exposed you to a toxic and potentially deadly substance on that ship."

"Whad da ya mean, lady?" he asked

"I mean that I am radioing in for special secure transport for you to go to the hospital where you will undergo a series of, hopefully, painful examinations that should teach you to obey orders when it comes to protecting yourself. I don't know how

you Canadians work things, but in the U.S. doing what you five have been doing is dereliction of duty and punishable by prison time!" She hit the accelerator and drove away from the confused, but obviously ill man. She knew it would only be a matter of time before the others exhibited the same symptoms.

It was another sight altogether once she reached the ship. All the Mounties were completely inside their sealed suits. It was still fairly cool in the pre-eight o'clock morning and they were probably glad to have the extra covering, but she wondered how many of them had been lax at other times.

To one side sat two large tents with their dual-chamber locks designed to keep infiltration of harmful substances at a minimum. They were, she noted, sealed.

As she turned the jeep off she watched one of the officers, probably a woman by the short stature, come over to see her.

"Corporal Cheryl 'Moose' Dimmock," the woman reported giving Anne a salute.

"Uh, I guess as you were, or something like that," Anne told her. "I'm FBI agent Boone. Please call me Barbara," she added mentally clenching her teeth and squeezing the name out. "I have to ask you something and there is no right or wrong answer. I just need the simple truth. How many of you have been out here without some or all of your protective suits since you arrived?"

The corporal's face showed some dismay and a lot of embarrassment through her clear faceplate. "Ummm, everyone but me, ma'am. They zipped up as soon as the road guards radioed you were on the way. You see, the guys think this protective gear is sissy stuff." She shrugged to indicate that she did not, but the behavior or the others was out of her control.

"I see. Well then, you will need to report to your headquarters that everyone had been infected with a bacteria or virus that we have not been able to identify, but one that will make them ill and then possibly lead to their deaths."

"Oh-h-h-h..."

"Yeah. Oh is right. Tell your masters they must absolutely get

a new team out here of people who can follow orders and who do not want to die. This team, perhaps with the exception of you, needs to be out of here by tonight and in isolation and being started on intravenous drugs to help keep them alive!"

The corporal ran off and into a smaller structure that must hold their field communications equipment. She was back two minutes later.

"The Captain hit the ceiling when I told him everyone else wasn't adhering to protocols. He said to tell 'that blasted American agent if this isn't the absolute truth that she's in for all sorts of hell, and if it is true she's in for a grateful apology.' That's it word-for-word, ma'am."

"Barbara," reminded Anne.

"Yes, ma'am... uhh, Barbara. What do you want me to do?"

Anne asked that all the others be called in for a conference, including the five by the makeshift barrier. It took fifteen minutes for the five to walk in—they were heavily perspiring and looking pretty bad by the time they arrived.

"Sit," she commanded. They reluctantly dropped to the ground. "The five of you who jut came in, you are to get those iso-suits back on and sealed right now. You have left yourselves open to the very thing you were sent here to protect others against. In fact, you are all sick right now. If you do not do what I tell you, things your Captain will back me up on, you could die. Got that?" She looked around at the dismayed faced that were now nodding slowly.

"Good. Now, the corporal and I are the only ones who are safe right now. She and I have officially taken command of this encampment. You will follow her orders as if they came from me or your Captain, which they will. Those orders will probably save your lives."

She went on to tell them of her plans to enter the ship to take the necessary samples.

"I guess you lucked out. The sloppy way you took the first samples for the hospital is the only thing that got me out of my laboratory and up here. If I hadn't come, you would all fall down

and be very, very sick in another twelve to twenty hours. Except the corporal who evidently is the brains of the outfit!"

After ordering them all to go into the two sealable tents to rest, she motioned corporal Dimmock to follow her.

"If you would, can you just call me Moose?" she requested.

"Only as long as I don't hear another 'ma'am' from your lips until any superior officer get here. Deal?"

Moose smiled. "Yes, Barbara. Deal!"

Anne grabbed a fairly large duffel bag from the front seat of the jeep. It had been waiting for her and contained a standard FBI sampling kit along with some extra protective suits.

Moose offered to take it and the two women headed for the ship.

A makeshift gangway had been built using a portable rope bridge and some four-by-four posts driven deeply into the ground. They crossed one-at-a-time and soon were standing on the slightly listing deck in front of the raised pilot house and crew quarters.

Moose had already been on the ship once before, but had not been allowed into the forward hold. Instead, she had been tasked with collecting some food scraps and taking swab samples from the kitchen and the control room.

Though having never actually seen them, Anne complimented her on the quality of those samples, and Moose replied that she had once trained as a crime scene investigator with the Royal Canadian Army.

"I guess once you know protocols you just keep using them," she ventured.

Anne grinned. "And, you use word like 'protocols' as well. Anyway, good job and I suggest you get out of the Mounties, or at least this wing of it, and pursue the investigative side. So, let's go into that hatch and find the way to the hold."

They entered the ship through the hatch that had been, thankfully, dogged closed by someone. When Anne asked, Moose admitted to being that person. The ladder down was just

ten feet along a short cross-ship corridor and that door was also closed tightly.

Anne asked for the duffle which she opened and rummaged around finding a thick roll of some sort of clear, heavy-gauge plastic. She unrolled it and flattened it out on the deck.

"Is that... uh, is that an airlock?" Moose asked incredulously.

"It is that," Anne told her after glancing at the label. She read the instructions and then requested, "Help me pull the tape strips and get this up and sealed around that hatch. If nothing else, we ought to make a good try at sealing it from letting anything more out other than us and our samples."

It took about five minutes and the double-walled lock was up and sealed all around. The sealing strip had started out a pale green and had turned totally black as the sealant cured and indicated everywhere it was in full contact.

Anne unzipped the outer panel, pulled the small chamber out a little to let air inside, and stepped inside.

"After I get in there and seal the other side, you come on in. But, you need to wait until I set this off," she told the Mountie holding up a small aerosol can. "Disinfectant. We'll use one going in and my other two coming out."

It took only a few minutes until they were standing on the small platform at the top of a ship's ladder. This one went down the full three levels of the hold and was, from about five feet beneath their feet, covered with the greenish slime that practically shimmered from Anne's powerful light.

"No need for us to go too far down," she declared. "Just low enough to get my five sample tubes immersed so the partial vacuum inside can suck in what I need." She showed Moose how the clear, impact-resistant tubes worked and handed her two of them. "I'll go down and get some from the lowest point I can reach and you get one from either side of the ladder just above where I stop. Make them good and goopy. Okay."

"A-OK, Ma— umm, Barbara."

Anne nearly slipped at one point as she reached out a little farther than she should have, but Moose grabbed a handful of

her suit's right shoulder and steadied her long enough to back up one rung and get hold of the railing.

"Thanks, Moose. You'd better believe I'm putting you in for a commendation or something."

The procedure for exiting began on the platform inside the hatch where Anne pulled out four packets, each containing a three-foot-square wet wipe they used to clean each other's suits. Next Moose entered the airlock, taking one of the aerosols with her. After sealing the inner panel, setting the thing off and waiting fifty seconds for it to do its magic, she unzipped the outer panel and exited.

Anne repeated the actions and joined her new compatriot in the corridor.

"And those samples are exactly what I know you would have collected for me had your somewhat chauvinistic counterparts allowed you in to do this the first time. Again, I thank you."

By the time they got outside and back across the rope bridge, it was just turning ten a.m. They walked to the camp where, to Anne's dismay and anger, two of the Mounties were standing outside their tent smoking. One of them was the idiot from the checkpoint, the one with the drool.

She screamed at them through her suit telling them they were on report for purposely disobeying a direct order. One of them muttered a foul word to her and she found herself charging forward, fists flying.

She hit the man with such an unexpected level of fury that his knees buckled and he dropped to the ground, stunned. His companion backed off apologizing and loped to the tent entrance.

"Stop right there!" she commanded. He did and came to a somewhat weak attention. Now that you two are out you can't go back in. Now that you are out you two will be handcuffed by the corporal here and will wait outside getting more and more of the bacteria inside you until your Captain arrives in a few hours."

Moose took the handcuffs from both the men's belts and made the standing man sit behind the groggy one. With an

intricate maneuvering of their arms she had them backward-hugging each others bodies and their hands crossed and manacled expertly.

"And that, Agent Boone," Moose said loudly enough so all the men in the tents could hear her, "is called the Houdini shackling. Short of them dislocating both of their arms and possibly ripping their wrists open, they will not be escaping that!" She winked at Anne and grinned.

Next, Moose walked over to the two tents and pulled padlocks from pockets next to the zippers. These she attached and snapped shut. She called into the tents:

"Because you cannot be trusted to stay in there, even if it is the only way you might survive this, I have now locked you inside. And, you are all officially under arrest per RCMP Order Zed-nine-nine-seven-Alpha. Anyone not staying inside or attempting to escape shall be charged with criminal escape and treason."

She came back to Anne and nodded.

"What now?"

"Well, now you and I go back to the airport, get disinfected, cleaned up and changed into clean suits. There, we will wait for your superiors and the transport for your former officers. Or, rather your former *fellow* officers. If they survive, which I believe is still possible for everyone that stayed inside, I doubt they will want to work with you again. Sorry about this."

"Not me," Moose told her as they climbed into the jeep.

At the airport first Anne and then Moose wielded the hose and nozzle spraying the each other with the disinfectant. After waiting for it to dry they entered the old trailer. Inside it was anything but old. It featured a two-person airlock with a side panel in which they shoved their dirty iso-suits.

With them both standing in their underwear now, Anne noted that the corporal had an incredibly proportioned body.

"I have to ask you, Moose, how you hide those," she said pointing at the girl's chest.

"Years of slightly hunching my shoulders forward, Barbara.

That and special panels I sew in my uniform blouses and tunics to sort of keep them in check."

They entered the trailer where clean jumpsuits in several sizes were to be found. Moose had to cuff up the legs but soon they were dressed respectably if only a little utilitarian.

Anne mentioned that she was on a rather unannounced mission and needed to make a call.

Moose headed for the bathroom. "Just let me know when I've been in there long enough," she said closing the door behind her.

Anne dialed Damon's desk number. She told him how she had arrived and she and her friend immediately went to a doctor's appointment.

"She is actually doing better than she believes. I guess if you get told this sort of diagnosis your mind sort of goes to the worst case."

"How far along?"

"Umm, late stage two but still can be handled beginning with chemo and radiation. Which she starts later today. In a month or so she will have to have the lump removed and some more radiation, but the doctor is quite certain she will get through this. I'll call again after we get her home and she's comfortable for the night."

After ending the conversation she called out, "You can come out, Moose."

The sound of the toilet being flushed surprised her, but Moose exited and said, "Must have been the surroundings. I found out I really needed to be in there."

Anne placed a call to Quimby Narz to fill him in on both the progress getting samples as well as the troubles with the Mounties.

"Let their commander know ASAP that Corporal Dimmock has, at my order, placed the lot of them in confinement and under arrest using some RCMP order she knows. Also find out when the transport to get them to the hospital is due. We'll be at the trailer at the airport until then."



"I just spoke with the Captain and he assures me the isolation bus will be there within the hour including a dozen new Mounties who have all been told their friend and associates will possibly die from disobeying orders regarding the wearing of those suits. Uhh, when do you want to come back?"

"Later tonight, but once I get the replacement boys settled I want to take a drive with my new assistant and have a look around the surrounding area. Maybe even go talk to the other farmers down the road."

"Hmmm. Not certain I like that, but how about if I arrange the helo to be at the airport at nine tonight?"

"Can he land at night?"

"Yes. There is a red toggle switch by the door. See it?" She said she did. "That turns on the landing lights controller which the helo pilot will activate with a radio signal as he gets near, and that turns on the lights he requires. So, yes."

The transport, complete with a nearly apoplectic Captain who spent the entire thirty minutes they stayed there, screaming at his sick men, left as quickly as they arrived, leaving behind twelve somewhat nervous Mounties and Moose. But, before leaving he had addressed the young woman.

"You are a credit to your uniform, Miss Dimmock. Conditions notwithstanding, the RCMP and I are proud to have you as part of our force. After this has concluded I shall personally entertain any request for transfer you might wish to make."

"Thank you, sir," she had said, barely able to get the words out.

After they were gone Anne suggested taking a little drive. Moose enthusiastically agreed.

A wind gauge showed the prevailing winds heading out to the ocean so Anne made the decision to bring but not to wear their protective suits, insisting just that they wear face masks until they were a mile farther away.

"We'll put them on before we come back," she explained.

The jeep trundled along the two-lane road, marked as a 'highway' to Anne's amusement, for nearly eight miles before

they both caught sight of some lights in the distance from several homes up hill from the road.

As they turned onto the main road she consulted her phone's mapping application. It told her they had just about two miles to travel to the small farming settlement.

But, when they arrived and made the turn off onto a dirt driveway, she let out a curse. Four heavily armed men stopped them, surrounding the jeep and leveling their guns at Anne's and Moose's heads.

From the side of her mouth, Anne muttered, "Have I told you that I absolutely hate field work?"

## CHAPTER XIX

### NOT EXPECTING ANYTHING IN PARTICULAR

"GET OUT!" a man with a slightly Eastern European accent ordered. He punctuated his command by sharply poking Anne in the shoulder.

Her only thought went to, *Great. Coming right up, one nasty bruise. Now I have to come up with some excuse to tell Damon!*

The man pulled the gun barrel back as if to repeat the action, so she swung her legs out and stepped from the jeep. She glanced behind her to see that Moose, with no visible insignia of her official position, had also complied.

"Tell me, why you are snooped around?" the leader demanded. "What is purpose of you coming to our, uhhh..." he turned to one of the other, snapped his fingers twice, and stared. The man replied, "Farm," and he turned back to Anne. "Why you are come to our farm?"

"Firstly, I, or we, are not *snooping* around your farm. We were out for a drive and wanted to stop for some directions. We work back there in Port Hawkesbury. At the hospital. There was a report of a few people out this way who've gotten sick, so we thought we'd look into it."

She looked at him trying to put an air of innocence on her face. "Is anyone around here sick?"

She noted the worried glanced back and forth between all the men.

"You are doctor?" One of them asked, a younger man perhaps the same age as Cheryl Dimmock who she noted was openly staring at the beautiful young woman.

Anne turned back to the leader. "I am sort of a doctor. Not medical but research. I deal with the things that make people sick but not the people. May I ask why you want to know if I am a doctor?"

"Get in car, now!" he ordered. In what sounded to be a Slavic language he spat out several sentences that must have been a

series of orders to the other men. Two of them returned to their positions sitting on old chairs on either side of the side dirt road while the young man and the leader climbed into the back of the jeep.

Anne looked at Cheryl and shrugged. They resumed their former seated positions. With the sun going down and now in her eyes, Anne had to drive a little more slowly than the leader wished—and his menacing gun made certain she realized it—but it was either do that or run the risk of hitting a pothole with enough force to disable the jeep.

They were approaching the closest farmhouse to the main road when he barked out, "Stopping! Now!"

At that moment she felt her phone vibrate. She had set it to do that only if Quimby Narz was calling. If it had been Damon it would have rung once and gone to voice mail.

Cheryl evidently heard the vibration go off and looked at Anne. Anne winked as casually as she could and the corporal gave an almost imperceptible nod.

They both knew that lacking Anne answering that call, someone would send out an alarm within seconds.

Now with more worry than anger, the older man told them to get back out and led them to the front door of the nearby house, unlocked it and entered. Inside were two others, both lying on the floor covered to their chins with sheets and blankets. He knelt beside one and touched the man's neck. A mournful croak came from his throat and he pulled the sheet up over the deceased man's face.

He repeated the check on the other and let out a sigh of relief.

He looked pleadingly at Anne.

"You doctor of some kind. Please save my son?" It was definitely a question and not an order.

Anne pulled her mask up over her face and nodded to Cheryl who also put hers on. She looked at their captor.

"I need the small gray case from the jeep," she slowly told him referring to a special emergency first aid case. It contained some simple antibiotics along with medicines for fever, intestinal disorders, sedatives and, most importantly, two 1-liter

packs of saline with I.V. lines.

It was retrieved by the younger man who handed it to Anne before his gaze returned to Cheryl. Realizing that it would be good to have a potential ally, she smiled encouragingly at him.

In moments Anne had the I.V. needle in the patient's arm and was preparing two syringes with the two antibiotics she had available.

"What is?"

"Is medicine to help control what is making him sick. Both of these," she explained. He held his hand out and she placed the two small bottles in it. He glanced at the labels but obviously could not read English. "Read to me."

"Cheryl? Will you please read the labels to this man while I save the life of his son? Concentrate on the good stuff on the side label."

While the young woman read, Anne pushed the first needle into the special small chamber in the I.V. line meant for just such an action. She slowly pushed the plunger down and nodded as the slightly white-colored liquid mixed with the dripping clear solution and disappeared into the boy's arm.

A large hand gripped her forearm, but gently.

"Is good for my son?" She nodded. "Good. You give make my son live."

Anne patted his hand and he removed it allowing her free movement to insert the second needle and dispense its contents. Once it was in the boy, she took the saline bag Cheryl had been holding with one hand while she'd read the bottles. She began to squeeze the contents down the line to get it into the boy's arm as quickly as possible.

He had been losing fluids through his saliva at an alarming rate. The wet floor, his neck and soaked shirt were testament to that.

She realized there was going to be a problem. It would only take about fifteen minutes to dispense this first bag and another fifteen or so for the only other one. He needed more.

"Cheryl?"

"Yes'm?

Anne ignored her retreat into formality. "I need you and your fine young admirer to go to the kitchen, find a clean pan, fill it with water—filtered if there is any chance in hell of that—and get it boiling as quickly as possible. Then let it boil one minute, take it off and pour it back and forth into another clean container to cool it off. If they have any plastic zipper bags and ice, drop an ice bag into it. I need it as close to body temperature as possible and in less than twenty minutes."

"What are you going to do with that?"

"Refill this I.V. bag with sterile water so I can try to keep this young man alive. Go!"

From the kitchen Cheryl called out, "They have about twenty one-gallon bottles of distilled water, Barbara. Want me to use that?"

Anne turned to the man. "Is water in kitchen clean? Not opened?"

He nodded vigorously.

"Cheryl? Just bring me one gallon, please. Make certain the cap is still sealed, though."

The bottle appeared quickly and Anne double-checked it. It was sealed and would be as good as boiled water for the young man. She checked and the current I.V. bag was down to about one-fifth of its contents.

"As soon as I switch over to bag two I want you to take this one, carefully unscrew the cap and ease out the tubes inside just enough to pour some of that water in. Do not touch anything inside and do not pull things all the way out. Just an inch or two at most. It'll take about a liter. Got it?"

"Got it! Just say when."

Three minutes later Anne detached the first bag and Cheryl was there to hand her the other one while taking the spent bag. Anne's hands were tiring so she showed the father how to squeeze it and at what strength. She turned the bag over to him and flexed her fingers. They had been on the verge of cramping.

She checked the boy's pulse and placed a flexible

thermometer strip on his forehead. The youth's heartbeat was weak but steady, and the temperature was reading about 102°. As the father looked at her and the strip, she really hoped that she would not have to explain the difference between Centigrade—the Canadian standard—and Fahrenheit to anyone. All she knew was that water boiled at 100°C and around 212°F.

She called up a calculator on her phone noting that a tiny red pixel was showing in the lower-left corner of the screen. It was Quimby's signal that help was on the way.

Her calculations told her she could give the boy more antibiotics so she prepped two clean syringes with the drugs. She also filled another one with a liquid form of aspirin to bring the fever down a little.

All three went in while the father was massaging the bag.

Anne was about to panic about what to do once that bag was empty when she remembered the refilled one. After that, this bag could be refilled. But, she knew she could only push in about three liters per hour before she risked overpowering his circulatory and renal systems. Kidney shutdown was a danger she wanted to avoid at all costs.

Anne decided she needed to risk their safety. If the man were more frightened about being located—and Anne had a notion he and the others may have been the crew of the grounded ship—than he was in fear of losing his son, she was going to regret it. But she decided in order to avoid possible bloodshed once the rescue team arrived she must be up front.

"What is your name?"

"Wha— ahh, is Sergei."

"Okay, Sergei. Some time very soon people will come looking for us. We are late getting back and they will send a team of people to get us. People with guns. I do not want you, or your son or this other young man or even the two men at the road to be hurt. Do you understand me?"

He nodded, his lips drawn tight.

"Good. Then Cheryl and I need to be free to go when they get here. I need to be free to answer my phone when they call to check to see if they should come in with their guns. Can you

understand that?"

His mouth turned into a frown, but he nodded again. "Yes. Must end. Is all very bad from begin time. You go. Now?"

"No, not now. But, it might be soon. I do not know when our friends come, but soon. They will get your son and all of you to hospital where you can get medicine to keep you alive. Okay?"

He nodded, tears now glistening in his eyes. "Yes, is okay. My son will live now?"

Anne nodded hearing Cheryl sniffing with the emotion of the moment.

She pulled her phone out and showed it to him. As she did she pressed the # key which would send a message not only containing their GPS location but also to notify Quimby that they were relatively safe.

"I sent signal that the rescue team is to *not* shoot, but I think it would be best if your men were to hide their guns so there is no possibility of not understanding. Yes?"

"Yes." He spoke to the young man clearly enamored with Cheryl in the same foreign language as before. Reluctantly, he reached out to take her hand. She didn't resist. He brought it to his lips and gently kissed her knuckles before going out the door.

"Golly," was all she could manage to get out. "He's kind of cute, too."

As she smiled, Anne's phone vibrated again. She looked at the man who nodded and kept up kneading the saline bag.

She answered the call.

"Quimby, this is Barbara Boone. We thought we were in trouble and it turns out we may have found the ship's crew, and they were exposed to whatever it is that we've been fighting. One dead and one very ill. Prepare iso-suits and two iso-bags, one with an air supply. The helo needs to transport the worst of the ill first, then the others and finally myself and my young Mountie aide. Got that?"

She listened, answered a few questions and hung up. It was time to change the saline bag and she suddenly thought about the *saline* nature of what was in the first two bags.



"Crap. Cheryl, I almost goofed. Go find a salt shaker. I have to put a half tablespoon in this fresh bag. Quickly, please."

Cheryl was back in seconds and the salt was added to the fresh bag. As Ann watched the last of bag #2 disappear, she shook the new bag vigorously to dissipate the salt. It was absorbed in no time so the swap was made again and Anne checked the man's vitals.

The heartbeat was a little stronger and the strip showed that the temperature had reduced by nearly a full degree.

When she told the father about this he began weeping with joy.

Cheryl took over the bag duty to give him a chance to rest.

One of the two other men plus Cheryl's young admirer came back in. They carried the guns from the station at the road. In broken English the young man explained that only the one man was still down there and would show others how to get to the house.

"No shoot," he exclaimed as he laid the guns on a rickety old wood table.

The rescue team, complete with a U.S. Army Chinook hospital helicopter—with full isolation set-up—arrived about one hour later. Anne came outside and met them, her badge held high for all to see. She dropped her hand when Quimby came out from behind a second, smaller helicopter and walked up to her.

"Excellent field work, Agent Boone," he stated loudly enough for all close by to hear.

Anne couldn't help laughing. She had never noticed before, but at least in his head-to-toe suit, Quimby Narz didn't so much walk as waddle.

Two minutes later the sick young man was being carried to the waiting Chinook. His father, the two men from the road and the young man were following, but Cheryl's new fan turned to her and said, "In heart I am feeling empty going away. Is most pleasure in life to have meet you."

Cheryl took him in her arms and gave him a hug. Surprised at what he felt that was hidden inside her clothing, he backed up,

looked down, looked back up and smiled broadly.

Then, he was being escorted in a firm elbow grip to the larger helicopter by an FBI man.

A large truck trundled up the driveway. It was towing a large tank Anne thought must contain disinfectant. She hoped it did not contain anything that might be used to sterilize the house and area by the use of fire!

She, Cheryl and Quimby got into the smaller helicopter and pulled the door shut behind them. The pilot—the one who had flown her up—was in an isolation suit. Narz told him to head for the airport. First, he radioed the other helicopter telling them he was about to raise and they answered they would do the same in under three minutes.

"We can go back to the trailer, disinfect there and travel home in some comfort," Quimby told them.

Anne let Cheryl go inside the trailer on her own after disinfecting her suit. Quimby did the spray-down honors for Anne and then he and the pilot sprayed each other. In fifteen minutes they were inside.

While waiting for the men, the women had used some handy towels to wipe themselves down. They were back in their jumpsuits by the time Quimby knocked to see if everything was clear.

He and the pilot had traveled over from Moncton zipped up in their suits only sealing their helmets at few minutes from the farm. Neither had exerted themselves so neither was sweaty. The did, however, looked a bit ruffled in the street clothes both had been wearing.

Anne was about to comment that the trailer ought to have an iron when her phone rang. She looked at the others who immediately became quiet.

"Hi, Damon," she said pressing the **ON** button. "Hey! How's your day been?" She listened for a minute before responding, "Well, she's home and safe and tired as anyone could be, but I believe she is going to be fine. I'd like to stay through tomorrow and come home the morning after if that's okay?" Damon must have agreed because she said, "You are the most wonderful man

in the world, and I love you, too! I'm heading for bed now but I'll call you in the morning. Give Tommy and Sandy mommy's love and tell them I'll call them tomorrow morning. Love you!"

She hung up and looked at her companions.

"Was the 'she' you mentioned actually referring to you?" Quimby asked.

Anne smiled a tired smile and nodded. "Yes."

"Okay, then lets get the hell out of Nova Scotia and head home," he suggested.

Anne looked at Cheryl who was looking sad but resigned to being left behind.

"Oh, and Sergeant Dimmock?" Quimby turned to the young woman.

"Yes, sir? And it's just corporal, sir."

He shook his head. "No it is not. As of eight o'clock this evening, I guess that's something like sixteen-hundred hours—"

"Twenty," Anne, Cheryl add the pilot chorused.

"Fine. As of twenty-hundred hours you are officially a Sergeant in the RCMP with something about pay and honors commensurate. Anyway, the gist of things is that the way you've handled things here with A—with Agent Boone have been brought to the attention of the Commander General of the RCMP who has authorized the immediate increase. And, he has asked the FBI to transport you to wherever you wish to go; you have your choice of transfers. So, congratulations, and where can we take you?"

Cheryl Moose Dimmock looked at Anne. "I don't actually know, sir."

Anne had an idea. "How about Quantico, Agent Narz? She has CSI training and was an absolute boon to me today. She knows her stuff and I'd even sponsor her if there is such a thing."

Narz shook his head. "There isn't. But, and I can't promise this, but there might be an open position, junior of course with very little field work at first, available. Want to come down with us tonight for an interview or come later on your own? I'll clear

things with the brass—yours and mine."

Both hands went to her mouth and Cheryl began to giggle. "Come? Of course I'll come. Today if possible. There's nothing holding me up here. Oh, golly, this'll be great. And," she said looking at Anne, "as far as field work goes, I could grow to love or hate it. We'll see."

"Give me five to spray down the helo and get her warmed back up, then you three charge out and get in. I'd really like to do this *dans le nu*, if you get me."

When he was outside, Cheryl asked, "Do you think he really meant 'in the nude?' I mean, I'm no prude but I'd kind of like to keep my shirt on, if you get me."

Anne smirked which confused Quimby as she replied, "Oh, I *absolutely* get you, Moose. I really do. I think he meant in civvies."

The helicopter took off a few minutes later and the three passengers relaxed and talked about the farm incident during the flight.

Using an explanation that the small airport in Shopton was the place where Cheryl would catch her plane for Washington while "Agent Boone" would catch a different flight for points west, Cheryl climbed out of the helicopter and turned to give Anne a huge hug.

"I can't tell you what a great time I had today. Even with the guns and all. You're a really great agent and I can see why they turned this one over to someone with experience like you. I only hope that someday I can reach your level. Maybe even work with you on some case."

Stepping back and with tears in both their eyes, Anne could only tell her, "I hope so, too. So long, Cheryl. And, unless you insist, I don't think anyone ought to call you Moose any more. Oh, and keep 'em covered!"

As the young woman walked away, Quimby came over beside Anne. "What was that about keeping covered?"

"Just a little something between Cheryl, me and her *soutien-gorge ajusteur*. So, how do I get back to the lab at this time of night and then how do we do the car thing day after tomorrow?"

On the drive to downtown he explained that he would be letting her in through his special entrance and that she would be driven out of town early Sunday morning where the car swap would take place just outside of town. She would explain that she had departed Albany at five that morning because she was so anxious to get home.

"And I have to sleep over at the lab tonight?"

When he said that was the plan, she shook her head. "Do you know how torturous those bunks are? Poor Wiley was nearly crippled the other day and that was just after a short nap. I'd rather sleep on the sofa upstairs in the bank."

"Can't. The safe deposit vault is time locked. You could get up into it but be trapped until Monday morning once the wall closed. Not to worry. Wiley informed me, in no uncertain terms, that his days of staying late were over until we replaced the mattresses. That happened earlier this afternoon. All the bunks now have four-inch foam mattresses instead of the old two-inch prison issue ones."

"You could buy better linens, you know," she told him.

"And, Doctor Oswaldt mentioned something about three-hundred thread count and pee-ma cotton or something like that."

She spelled it for him.

"Huh? Just p-i-m-a? Must be pretty special stuff."

"It is and it will give years and years of wear and make anyone needing to remain overnight very happy."

It turned out that Quimby's special, super-secret hidden entrance to the lab was a roof access ladder at the back of the bank. Not actually the ladder but behind the metal ladder that was covered with an un-scalable metal mesh which was secured with multiple locks. Once the locks were keyed opened, the bottom eight feet of the ladder and wall swung out and to the side exposing a short, dark passage. He motioned her inside, followed, and pulled the ladder shut behind him.

Anne heard it click solidly into place and the heavy mesh also swing and lock again.

As soon as that finished, red "night vision" lights came up

showing her the passage only extended back another three feet.

"Press the lump you can feel to the right of the mid point on the back wall.

She did and two things happened. The lights shifted, over about three seconds, to normal, white light and the back panel swung outward and into a stairwell.

They descended and came out through another door that was very well disguised in the lower hallway just past the isolation hospital room.

He wished her a good evening and left the same way they came down while Anne walked to the door of the hospital room. She opened it and startled the nurse. She was happy to see that it was Bre, again.

"Just got back from an assignment and thought I'd better get a status check from you. Sorry if I surprised you."

The pretty young nurse told her that the five patients were doing no better but that the tearing on their skin was healing; the sepsis was still progressing albeit slowly.

"They'll be only slightly worse by morning. You go get some sleep, Dr. Swift."

Anne thanked her and walked down the hall. As she was undressing and slipping between the sheets she realized that it had felt good to be called by her real name after even one day of being Barbara Boone.

She awoke at seven and was confused until it sank in that she wasn't at home and didn't have to get the children ready.

After showering, dressing and getting a cup of coffee—coffee she noted had also changed for the better—she headed for the lab.

## CHAPTER XX

### LATHER, RINSE, REPEAT

AS ANNE sat looking through everything Wiley had been able to do while she was absent, a chill ran through her body. During a time when the antibiotics ought to have made the patients better, they had barely managed to keep them from getting worse.

The containers she returned with were safely in the storage vault and one of them had just been sent back up so small samples could be parsed out into the various pieces of equipment. The first one to be ready was a simple slide so she ordered it to be moved to the microscope.

The second sample was almost ready for the spectro-analysis machine and yet another would come shortly for use in the electron microscope.

Her monitor showed two interesting things: first was that the algae was not living; and second that the chloroplasts were still a muted but fairly bright green.

That wasn't right. Dead algae was grey or brown algae!

But a third surprise finally managed to get her attention. The normally roughly rectangular arrangement of the cells of this algae were nearly circular and gaps appeared between them.

There shouldn't be gaps, she told herself. But, perhaps that was why the cells remained greenish. Oxygen was able to get in and around the cells keeping decay from occurring. But, they had mutated into something different.

Now she wished she had thought to take a portable microscope up to Canada with her. It would be possibly helpful to have looked to see if the samples were still alive shortly after being taken and this death had been in the ensuing twenty hours.

She placed a call to the hospital where the father, son and other crew members of the abandoned ship had been transported. The duty physician was cautious about telling her

anything but did say that the young man—the son—had improved overnight.

"Sorry but that is all I am at liberty to tell you until I can see some credentials."

She decided to not inform him that it was her prescription of the antibiotics that was saving the young man's life, thanked him and hung up. She next typed in a message for Bre, the nurse next door, giving her the new pair of antibiotics she wanted the patients to start receiving right away.

Half an hour later Wiley let himself in. The bank was opened Saturdays until noon so he had come in the front door as soon as they officially opened.

"I did very little while you were away," he told her.

"Right. And all I did in Canada was sit around a camp fire eating s'mores. Don't kid a kidder, Wiley. All these samples and photos and everything else. You did some really great stuff. And, I'm hoping that combined with what I brought back, and what I saw up there, we might get a little closer to the truth."

"Annie, I suppose I ought to tell you a couple things. First, your experiment trying to grow that algae sample failed. Luckily you brought back lots and lots of the stuff, I see. The second thing is something about working for the FBI. If we find the cure, that is all they really want from us. They do not pay us to find the truth unless it is part of discovering the cure. Some of the people farther up the food chain there have little hissy fits if we show them up too much."

This frustrated Anne a little, but she put it out of her mind as she told him about the situation at the farm and how the six men had been the crew, or at least part of it, on the ship. She also told him about the I.V.s and about Cheryl Dimmock.

"We need to look more closely at the antibiotics we are using," she told Wiley. "At that farmhouse I only had a meds box with Spectinomycin and Bacitracin. Not even in my personal top twenty for what I would have preferred to try. The thing is, they started working within half an hour and, along with I.V. aspirin, lowered the patient's temp at least a full degree in that time."



Wiley laughed. "Drugs for a social disease and lady's bladder infections? Amazing."

"Is the cocktail they're been getting next door anything different than the first one we came up with?"

"No. And it isn't very effective in reversing the infection, holding it from getting wildly out of hand, but not so much on the curative side." She told him she had ordered the new drugs to be started.

They were launching into a much deeper discussion about other combinations to use when the phone on Anne's desk rang.

She picked it up but only after seeing that the caller ID indicated it was coming from Canada.

"Barbara Boone," she identified herself.

"Miss Boone? Or is it Missus?"

"It's miss. And you are..."

"Oh. Sorry. This is Doctor Headly Addison of the Port Hawkesbury Memorial Hospital up in, well, you can probably guess that. Anyway, I was calling because we have one final patient who just came in, but he brought some news. I take it you know what I refer to?"

"Yes, I do, but please tell me about this person. One of the Mounties?"

"You got it. He said he got curious about what's inside that ship's hold and went in last night. Kept himself all suited up, and took a powerful light with him to get a good look. Down in that hold he spotted something. Something I think you ought to know about. Well, actually he spotted a couple things, but first, he found, just barely submerged, a quadruple-wrapped package that had partially broken open. He brought that out—unfortunately tearing his suit in the process—and we just finished ID-ing the contents. Almost pure lysergic acid diethylamide. I'm certain you know what that is."

"Oh, indeed I do, Doctor, And that explains why the first batch of patients had high blood levels of that particular substance. Guess you've solved *that* riddle."

"Glad to hear it, but there is more. It turns out that one of the people we have had here for the past week plus was one of the actual crew in that ship. He is so grateful we've probably saved him that he was willing to spout right off. That LSD was part of a shipment they were smuggling into North America from Eastern Europe; Belarus to be exact."

He gave her a few details about the route in had taken until it arrived in England where it was purposely weighted and submerged in the water and algae to hide it. She noted it all down to give to Narz.

"Now for the bad part of what he told us. After they set sail the Captain went down to check on their cargo. He did not come back. Another crewman found his body an hour later face down in the muck with a strange cylinder next to him."

"Do we know what was in that?"

"No. They tossed the body overboard but when they started having engine troubles it seems he was also the only engineer on board. That's why they drifted into shore. But back to your question. I figure that whatever was in the cylinder he must have released. So, I've got a Canadian Navy deep sea diver heading over there to collect some of the water under the green slime and to try to locate the cylinder if it is still there."

"Good idea," Anne complimented him. "As long as he goes in inside a full diving suit with sealed helmet, and gets decontaminated afterward, I would dearly love that sample."

She mentioned the tank and hose at the airport and suggested that the diver and anyone who also went in the ship be sprayed thoroughly. He thanked her for the information.

"Finally, I thought you'd like to know that the two Mounties who had to be, umm, sequestered outside from the others? They'll survive and are plenty angry with themselves. They are being relieved of duty and let go from the RCMP. From what I was told, they deserved nothing better."

She thanked him and he said, sounding a little embarrassed, "It's the least we can to. Good luck and I'd appreciate hearing what you come up with."

"Well then, before I let you go, here is a new drug cocktail to

try," and she gave him the pair she had on hand at the farmhouse and gave him the approximate dosages for any given body weight.

Being the weekend, Wiley had some personal business to take care of so he excused himself just before noon telling her he would be back bright and early on Monday.

Anne wandered next door to check on the patients. She was encouraged when the nurse gave her a thumbs up sign.

"The new antibiotics are doing the trick, Dr. Swift. In just the two hours since you sent through the new orders, they all seem to be improving. It's a steep hill for them to climb, but at least they are going up and not down any more."

"Do you ever sleep, Bre? You were here last night and still here today. What gives?"

Bre favored her with a bright if only a bit weary smile. "Sixteen hour shifts Friday through Monday morning. I'll be out of here in two hours, spot on noon. Then, my husband is taking me for a boat ride around Lake Carlopa and dinner at a friend's restaurant. A very early dinner because I will be asleep no later than seven-thirty." She smiled again and turned back to her work.

Anne headed down the hall to the break room where she called Damon. He was at home, as she hoped, and had just finished getting Tommy and Sandy towed off after giving them a joint bath.

"I think Tommy has reached the point where he doesn't want to bathe with his little sister," he told her. "He thinks it is yucky to take a bath with a girl."

Anne laughed. "Oh, how things will change in another ten or twelve years," she said. *Or, longer I kind of hope*, she thought. "Let's hope Sandy thinks it's yucky to be naked and wet with a boy for many, many years!"

"Amen to that. So, tell me, how's your friend? I've heard tell that it's the second day after getting chemotherapy that really gets to you."

Anne sighed. She was truly hating all the lies, but she forged ahead. "It was a pretty good night but she seems bushed this

morning. She was able to get some coffee and a stale Danish down, but she went back to bed when they nearly came right back up. I'll check on her in an hour or so, but I'm still planning on coming home tomorrow."

"Any idea what time? I was thinking of taking the kids out for pancakes around nine."

"I'll either be there just before you leave or waiting for you when you get back," she said.

At six that evening, as Anne was looking at some remarkably healed skin samples that the alternate nurse had obtained, her phone rang startling her and making her realize that she was tired and not really paying attention. She glanced at the yellow sticky note on the phone that reminded her to answer with her code name.

"Barbara Boone. Who's calling please?"

"Anne. It's Quimby. Had to use a friend's phone because I stupidly let my cell run down. Anyway, in about five minutes you should have the sample of the water from that ship. It'll appear on your list, but I wanted to make certain you know about it now. I'm charging my phone while I have dinner with my friends, and yes, I do have friends, so try me on that number whenever you get any answers. Thanks!" With that, the connection dropped.

While the sample may have arrived in five minutes, it really took almost fifteen before it had been categorized by the computer and made ready for her. She requested three samples for the electron microscope, a series of chemical detection dip sticks, and most importantly, for the spectro-analyzer.

She definitely saw something under the lens of the microscope, but it was murky and indiscernible. After a few minutes she gave up and turned to the spectro-analyzer. It had just pinged indicating the arrival of a new sample. She watched the array of lights on the front panel and waited, impatiently, for the results.

What she received was an astounding list of substances that took her an additional three hours to research.

In the end she sat back and let the tears flow. She had

answers for what had been attacking anyone exposed to the slime—and the water underneath—but no answers as to why it had happened as it had.

For starters, the algae was, or had been originally, a simple cyanobacteria similar to algae that tended to grow in saltwater aquariums. It most likely had been inside that hold for years and years getting only enough sunlight when the upper hatches were open for loading and unloading.

As for the water, she now believed that some of it might have been let in by the ship's captain once the drug bags had been covered by the slime down there. He may even have realized that the cylinder contained something vile after either opening it accidentally or on purpose and added more water in hopes of diluting it or washing it away.

What had been in that cylinder?

That is what gave Anne almost uncontrollable shivers.

First, there were more than slight traces of a chemical warfare agent chemically known as *Diphenylcyanoarsine* which was meant to cause uncontrollable vomiting on the battlefield. She believed that it had diluted enough to be the cause of the drooling in the people exposed to the slime.

Along with that were definite amounts of *Phosgene Oxime*, a substance meant to cause painful blisters and skin cell death; its intent had been to make walking nearly impossible for soldiers. Score another probable for it being the reason exposed skin, especially anything contacting the slime or then touching another body part, had started to die and crack or tear.

As she typed in her notes, Anne stopped to look at the last thing she had entered:

While it would appear that the algae partially detoxified the chemical agents, those agent made the algae change or mutate so it now contains a sickening neurotoxin similar to that which attacks shellfish in "red tides" along with LSD.

Anne looked up appropriate steps to neutralize both of the chemical agents. Unfortunately, both required heat. High heat... as in *fire*.

She stood up and stretched having been in her seat for several hours now. She reached back and massaged her bottom which was getting sore. Her desk chair was nothing near as nice as her favorite easy chair at home.

She sighed. It would now be soon enough before she could leave for what would hopefully be a long period of time before she was needed back in the lab.

As Anne walked down the hall to get her sixth mug of coffee of the day, she considered how anyone might use fire inside that ship without sending it to the bottom, which would only spread the mutated algae. She rushed back to her computer and put in a note in all capital letters to the effect that UNDER NO CIRCUMSTANCES should the ship be sunk to get rid of the problem; it might exacerbate it!

Glancing back at some earlier notes, she had an idea. In moments she was typing again:

With the only safe way to dispose of the algae and the chemical agents in the water being high heat, is it possible to safely pump out the water and take it to a facility dealing with chemical weapons? They would have large-scale incinerators. Otherwise, could the upper hatches be opened, some sort of burnable liquid sprayed down all the walls and anywhere else the algae is growing, set that alight and as it burns add more to the surface of the water/algae? If the ship gets too hot, how about fireboats spraying the outside of the hull with seawater?

It probably wasn't practical but it was the only thing she could think of.

She made more notes stressing the importance of neutralizing everything in that ship without allowing anything to escape.

Finally, she called Quimby's cell phone. It must have been recharged by now, and it was. She spoke three words, "We've gotta talk!"

His return call came nearly a full minute later.

"Sorry. Had to make an excuse to my friends. What have you

got?"

"Just about everything. Come down tonight so I can go home." She didn't wait for his answer; she hung up.

When he arrived and she had spent almost an hour detailing everything—including the drug cocktail that was working to cure everyone who had not perished from their exposure—he leaned back in his chair and rubbed his face.

"Wow," was all he got out for a moment. "Okay. We can impound the ship, and I don't think Canada will put up much of a fuss, and tow it to a weapons destruction facility. That's pretty easy. But, can that ship every be used again or will it need to be dismantled and melted down?"

Anne shrugged. "I don't know, Quimby. If everything gets cleaned and burned, and that wonderful disinfectant is heavily sprayed on absolutely every surface, nook and cranny, it could be worth selling it for the money it will take to make it safe. On the other hand, if it were mine I'd say, 'Burn that bad boy!' "

"We'll see," he said giving her a rueful grin. "Have you got everything in your notes?"

"Most of it but I have a couple more things to do here, and then I can't show up at home until tomorrow morning. Remember, I'm supposed to be in Albany with my sick friend?"

He smiled. "Of course I do, and just to show you how much it has been on all our minds, take a look at the photos on your phone." He nodded at the cell phone on her desk.

She picked it up and turned it on. On her phone were five pictures dated the previous day showing her and another woman about her age in a hospital room; the other woman was in bed with a small I.V. drug pack running into her arm.

Anne turned to Quimby, wide-eyed.

"How? That's really my friend."

"Just a little agency magic to back up your cover story. We do take care of our people, Anne."

He shook her hand and mentioned that her pay for the project would reach her account some time on Monday, then he

bid her goodnight and left.

It did not hit her until ten minutes later that he had mentioned nothing about their guests next door.

She walked out of the lab and coded into the hospital room.

Nobody was there. No nurse and no patients.

The beds inside the five chambers where their guests had resided for a week were stripped clean. In other words, there was absolutely no sign any one had ever been there.

Anne sighed and shook her head. *Typical*, she thought as she went back to finish her notes.

She knew that Quimby would make certain the other lab in Idaho got all of their notes and that somebody would be on the hunt for the missing drug cargo and any other crew members or locals who might have been involved. The drugs might even be at the farmhouse. She ought to tell Quimby about *that* thought.

Then again, Wiley had said they only wanted to be given cures not detective work from the lab people. She went ahead and added the note.

Twenty minutes after that she was in bed and falling rapidly asleep. The past two days had been a whirlwind of action, some of which almost seemed impossible to her.

Anne Swift almost laughed when an alarm went off in her nearby phone. She had not set it, but evidently Quimby had knowing she needed to "be on the road from Albany" by seven that morning. It was exactly six-fifteen.

She showered, dressed and picked up her bag. On it was a note from her handler telling her to use the back entrance with a description of where the lock releases could be found.

She was about to leave when she realized she would not be coming back to the lab until the next case. She would not be able to say goodbye to Wiley! There was no telling whether he would also be assigned to whatever came next for her. In all their talks they had not shared contact information. She felt a small tear run down from her left eye.

Taking a notepad, she wrote Wiley a letter explaining the outcome. More importantly, she added how wonderful it had



been working with him again and how she hoped to do it again.

She signed it:

*With great admiration and a whole heap of love for you,  
Wiley.*

*Annie*

\* \* \* \* \*

Anne arrived home only five minutes after Damon and the children had taken off for the pancake house, but she decided what she needed more than pancakes and even seeing her family was a long, hot, cleansing shower.

She left her overnight bag by the kitchen door and trudged upstairs to the door of the master bedroom where she stripped off all her clothes, shoving them into the laundry chute that would drop them to the basement.

She pushed the bedroom door open with her foot and crossed to the bathroom glancing longingly at the bed, Her bed. Where she could crawl into her husband's arms and be safe again.

But, hot water awaited. She walked in and turned on the light.

It had been a full day and night since she had last looked into a mirror, and she did not like what was standing there, naked, staring back at her.

Turning the lights off and closing the shade on the one window lowered the room's light to a point where she could still see but not enough to be bothered. The shower warmed up quickly and she stepped inside, sliding the glass door closed behind her.

For a full five minutes she just stood in the hot spray letting it soak away some of the sorest muscles, but mostly just feeling good.

Without thinking about it she went through the routine she always did: shampoo and rinse the hair, wash her face and neck, put some gentle soap on a loofa and scrub her body neck to ankles, and then use a small pumice stone to rasp off a few foot

calluses.

She turned to the control knob and was about to shut the water off when her hand dropped to her side.

She looked up at the shower head, calculated how long she had been in and about how much more hot water there would be in the tank, and reached down for the shampoo bottle again.

Anne Swift had realized that a single washing was not going to get every vestige of this case off her; she needed a second go-around.

## EPILOG

ANNE pushed a wisp of hair up from its current position covering her right eye. She hated the feeling stray hairs gave her as they worked their way across her face. She couldn't understand women, or men for that matter, who thought of that sort of thing as being a style choice. Bangs hanging over people's eyes especially bothered her, making her want to carry scissors to snip away the offending strands.

She was lounging in her favorite easy chair, a fresh cup of coffee on the table next to her. As she flipped through an old women's fashion magazine and sipped her coffee, she had to smile to herself.

The case that had just finished had been a real brain-twister, one that had tested her in ways she was not prepared for.

It was one of the most rewarding things she had ever accomplished.

Other than marriage and giving birth to her two children.

Or, curing cancer as a teenager.

Harlan had been correct. She *did* need the excitement and the mental exercise provided by her chosen field. He was also correct that she had missed it terribly. This one-week "event" had brought her back to life.

Even Damon had commented Tuesday evening about how excited she seemed.

"You certain you haven't found a man who isn't spending ten hours a day trying to bail of his family's company?" he had asked.

She hadn't said a word but managed to find a way to assure him as soon as Tommy and Sandy were asleep.

And, now here she sat. Five whole days had passed since she came home to just being a wife and mother. The magazine wasn't very interesting being aimed mostly at spring styles which would not be back for almost four months. She closed her eyes and replayed a few of the best moments from the lab. It had

been a wonderful time, filled with the joy of working with Wiley Oswaldt. The old rascal was every bit as great as she remembered from his classes at University and their time working in his basement lab.

As she considered the physical part of the job, her mind flashed on the subject of money. She never *had* asked Agent Narz how much they were paying her. He had never offered a number, just telling her that it was already in her brand new account with the Merchants & Co. Bank. They had given her a special number for her cell phone that connected to the automated system that would tell her exactly what she had at any time of the day or night.

Pulling the slip of paper from her wallet she dialed the phone. She had to enter the account and security information twice as she misread a zero as being a letter O, but soon heard a series of five pips, followed by a computerized female voice asking what she wished to hear about.

"Account balance," she said when prompted for her desired information or action.

Anne sat there waiting the several seconds for the voice to come back. When it did she listened to the amount it told her she had.

The phone slipped from Anne's grip.

She never, *ever* thought it would be *that* much!

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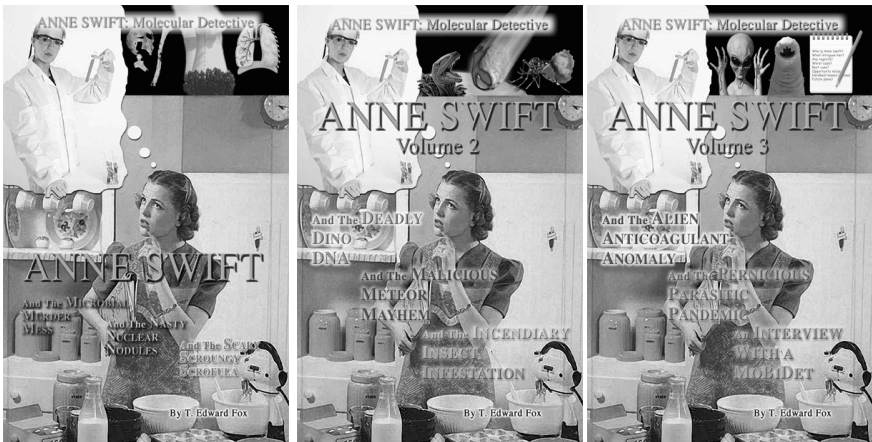
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The original Tom Jr. books featured Phyllis Newton. In my books she is gone. Here’s the story of how she disappeared.

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- {8} TOM SWIFT and the Galaxy Ghosts \*
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(Coming 2016)
- {19} TOM SWIFT and His Atlantean HydroWay  
(Coming 2016)

**...with more to be announced.**

\* *Galaxy Ghosts* may have been the final title in the *New Adventures of Tom Swift, Jr.* series (1954—1971), but this is **not** that story. That final book of the series was terrible, but it had an interesting title that this author has re-used in a much better story and book.



Copies of all of this author's works may be found at:

<http://www.lulu.com/spotlight/tedwardfoxatyahoodotcom>



My Tom Swift novels and collections are also available on  
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