

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 Police chopper picks me up and flies me back to civilization!"