



THE ANNE SWIFT INVESTIGATES SERIES

Anne Swift: Molecular Biologist Detective

The Nasty Nuclear Nodules

By Victor Appleton II

Anne Swift is called upon to put her training as a microbiologist to work for the FBI again. A local construction company has been digging for the foundation of a new City Hall when they come upon a strange blue orb.

To compound her troubles, the man who found it suddenly turns up dead and partially dissolved.

It proves to be mildly radioactive. Nobody knows where it might have come from, but a mystery foe of her husband begins to spread rumors that it is nuclear waste coming from Swift Enterprises.

Anne must discover the source of the orb, and the dozens of others that soon come to light, while secretly protecting her family's company and reputation.

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This book is dedicated to Anne Swift. During the time I have known her, she has proven to be a most agreeable woman. Her double life intrigues me no end. Watching her at work, my admiration for her has grown in leaps and bounds. A dear friend and feminist once uttered a phrase to another woman who was excelling at a sporting event. I think it applies to Anne. You Go Girl!

THE ANNE SWIFT INVESTIGATES SERIES

Anne Swift and the Nasty Nuclear Nodules

FOREWORD

Anne Swift is an enigma. Not generally seen in literature or even real life, she is able to keep up her dual existence with seemingly very little effort. That type of person is usually associated with some sort of spy or criminal.

Not Anne!

She is an exceptionally genteel woman who daylights—you really can't call it 'moonlighting' if it only occurs in the daytime, can you—when required, handling some of the most grotesque cases with ease and aplomb.

Then, as the old ad goes, she brings home the bacon, fries it up in a pan and never lets Damon forget he's the man in the house.

Is she schizophrenic or just better able to compartmentalize than the rest of us?

I feel that it is the latter. She knows how to put work behind her—for the most part—once she leaves the lab. She is someone to be admired. I know that I do.

And, I am indebted to Mr. Fox for continuing to chronicle her adventures... at least the ones we can be told.

Victor Appleton II

CHAPTER 1 /

NOT SURE I FEEL OKAY...

ANNE SWIFT sat in her kitchen in Shopton, New York. Like most mornings, she had risen at about 6:00 am and prepared breakfast for her husband, Damon Swift—the world-renown scientist and inventor—her almost equally-famous son, Tom Swift, and her beautiful teenage daughter, Sandy.

And, like most mornings, the conversation between father and son revolved around their latest projects. Damon was fulfilling a government contract doing some nuclear research, often at the Citadel, the nuclear research facility owned and operated by Swift Enterprises out in New Mexico.

Tom was nearing the completion of his own project for use at the Citadel, a giant robot capable of handling tasks within the reactor area that would be fatal for humans.

Sandy had been fretting about her steady date, Bud Barclay who was Tom's best friend. Like Tom, he was almost exactly a year older than Sandy.

Anne listened to their various chattering with nothing really making its way into her consciousness.

Instead, she was contemplating what the future might hold for her.

About a month previously she had assisted in the solving of a major crime; the cloning of more than two dozen beings and their subsequent murders via microbial infection.

She had read in the Shopton Bulletin the previous evening that a young woman, Eileen O'Brien had been found dead in her hospital room, victim of a mysterious disease.

Anne knew better. She knew what Eileen really had been. A chill ran down her spine as she wiped a small tear from the corner of her right eye.

Anne Swift spent her mornings and evenings as Damon Swift's devoted wife and Tom and Sandy's warm and caring mother.

What none of them realized was that she was also one of the FBI's top microbial biologists and was called in on project such as the recent one featuring the clones. It had left Anne with a strange sensation that she couldn't shake, even once the project was concluded.

She had returned to her "normal" life.

But, that was a full month ago, she thought. Now, I'm bored. I need something to happen.

She absently kissed them all goodbye as they departed and then sank down in her favorite easy chair in the living room with a cup of tepid coffee.

Ten minutes later there was a knock at the front door. Knowing that the Swift's home was protected by a magnetic field that set off an alarm whenever anyone or anything entered the perimeter without a special neutralizing device, she felt no fear in getting up and opening the door.

Harlan Ames, Swift Enterprises' chief of security and a past member of the Secret Service was standing there with a grin on his face.

"Thought they'd never leave, Anne," he said as she invited him in.

She offered him a cup of coffee which he gratefully accepted. "Been a very bad morning, Anne. I've been down in a deep hole slogging around in cold water and mud," he told her.

Sitting back down she inquired, "Why ever would you be doing that?"

"In preparation for putting you back on the clock," he said leaning forward.

Anne's heart began racing. "Back on the clock" was the FBI's code for the start of a new project.

"What is it," she asked, feeling that first tingle of excitement that she always felt when faced with a new challenge.

"You must be familiar with the great dig they're doing in preparation for building the new City Hall, right?"

Anne nodded.

"Three days ago one of their digging machines exposed a strange blue object. An almost perfectly round orb. It is solid, heavy, and cold to the touch."

"Sounds strange. Could it be glass from the old Shopton Silicates factory that was somewhere around there years ago?"

"Evidently, that's what this guy thought. He pulled it out, wrapped his coat around it, had a couple of the other guys help him get it into his truck and took it home that evening. Not a good decision."

"What happened?"

"The next day he's working in the same area when he comes over all dizzy. The guy had slept with our mystery orb on a chair in his bedroom. He called in to take the day off but showed up anyway."

"Chemical poisoning? Some infectious material?"

"Nobody knows. The only thing we have to go on is that he left work the middle of that afternoon telling everyone he didn't feel very well."

"Where is he now," she wanted to know.

"He's missing. His boss called the police yesterday and they called in the FBI. Not sure why, to tell you the truth. Anyway, I received a call from our good friend Quimby this morning asking me to be ready to get you on the job."

"I wonder why he didn't come or call me himself," she pondered out loud. Quimby Narz was Anne's chief contact with the FBI and someone who also worked with Swift Enterprises on occasion.

Harlan could only shrug. "He wants you in your lab around eleven. That's all I know," he added rising to leave.

She thanked him and took him to the door.

"Good," she said to nobody in particular as he drove off. "A real project with a mystery by the sound of it."

Anne entered the little branch of the Merchants & Co. bank five minutes before the hour. She went to the waiting area for access to the safe deposit boxes and filled out the little signature card.

A friendly young man buzzed her through a minute later and took her into the vault area. Closing the security door behind him he held out a small box about the size of a deck of cards. Anne placed her left thumb on the box. Three seconds later a blue LED lit up and the young man turned and left the room.

Turning around she watched as the bank of deposit boxes along the right wall moved backward and slid to one side revealing a doorway. She walked through and the wall closed behind her.

Although looking like a bank and even offering friendly tellers that took people's deposits, cashed checks and opened small loans, this facility was actually an FBI research center filled with laboratories and scientists all endeavoring to solve various mysteries from around the greater northeastern area of the US.

She allowed an iris scanner to identify her and was issued a security badge. This tiny plastic piece fit onto her keys along with similar plastic tags proclaiming her to be a loyal customer of this and that stores. Its presence on her keychain would ensure her ready access to the lab for the duration of this project.

Quimby Narz, FBI agent and an acquaintance through her husband, greeted her at the door to the lab she used while on duty.

"Morning, Anne," he said.

"Good morning, Quimby," she answered. "Tell me what you've got, please. Harlan was very cryptic and I *am* a stereotypically curious female."

He grinned at her. As a person, she was one of the nicest individuals he knew. As a scientist, her skills as a molecular biologist placed her in the top ten in the entire nation.

"Harlan told you about the dig?" She nodded. "And, the blue

object?" Another nod. "Mysterious sickness?" Nod. "Impenetrable material with slight amounts of radioactive leakage?"

This time Anne didn't nod. Her eyes widened. "Say that again, please, Quimby," she requested.

"The finder didn't show up at work yesterday because he is dead. The police went to his house discovered him, or what was left of him, sitting on the floor of his living room with the orb in his lap. He'd been trying to drill a hole in it and had only succeeded in causing a crack in the case and a pinhole leak."

"Back up again. You said 'what is left of him'?"

"Yeah. A little messy. The blue goo inside, and we're only talking about a few drops, got on his hand and it began eating through the skin. It didn't stop until it reached his shoulder."

"Some sort of an acid, then?"

Narz shook his head. "We don't know. I gave orders that nothing is to be touched, not even with gloves. I need you to come with me and we'll see if we can recover his body and that orb."

"How did he die?"

"We don't know, but if you spilled something on you that started to eat your flesh, you'd jump up pretty quick and wash it off, wouldn't you?"

Anne looked at the FBI agent. "Only if you were still alive, Quimby."

They left the lab building by a back entrance and got into Quimby's nondescript dark grey van. Anne was offered a pair of what appeared to be sunglasses.

"What are these," she asked.

"Look out the front window," Narz suggested.

Anne turned and suddenly saw that the entire front window was opaque. Looking around, she saw that even the side windows were almost impossible to see through. Light filtered in but nothing was discernible.

"Put them on," he told her.

As soon as the glasses were on her face, all of the windows in the van became perfectly clear. "Polarized," she guessed.

Quimby nodded and started the van. "It's a special polarization developed by the window industry. We've just put it to our own use. Security. Not only are the windows bullet-proof but they're vision-proof as well."

They arrived a small bungalow-style house near the outskirts of east Shopton. Anne noticed that the house was devoid of traditional '**POLICE — DO NOT CROSS**' tape. She asked about its absence.

"We're keeping this one very quiet for now. Until we find out something solid, the story is that our victim—Jeremy Glenn—took ill at work and we are with the EPA checking on possible mold or radon gas." He handed her a new ID badge.

Inside the house they met with another agent assigned to the case. He took them to the back room where the body was still sitting in place, but covered by heavy plastic sheeting. He whisked the sheet away exposing the body.

Anne's first reaction was to gag. As had been described by Quimby, he was sitting in the middle of his floor. The 'orb' was

nowhere to be seen, but then, most of his left arm was also not visible.

Taking out a sterile tongue depressor and unwrapping it, Anne pulled up the remaining skin and shirt and examined the muscle and bone tissues underneath.

Narz handed her a glass sample tube into which she placed some tissue she had scraped onto the wooden stick. She screwed the top down, wrote a quick note on the label, and then placed it into a metal case that the agent also provided.

“Though you’d need this stuff,” he told her.

Anne took several additional samples from the body including hair. She then took out a small camera and took more than three dozen photographs including many closeups of various parts of the body.

“Why the Kodak moment, Anne,” Narz inquired.

“I may find some evidence in them of how and when he died,” she responded. “Can they bring the body into the lab?”

“Not until tonight. You will have it by the time you come in tomorrow.”

Anne stood up looking at the body. She examined the area around it with particular attention to the carpet underneath it. She took out a scalpel from the samples box and sliced out a piece of it.

Holding the sample up, she asked, “Hey, Quimby. Do you notice anything strange about this?”

He knelt down and looked carefully at the piece she held in forceps. “I’m not sure I see anything special, Anne,” he admit-

ted.

“Then let me tell you. This carpet is made primarily of wool, a natural fiber. Our victim here is made of flesh and bone, also natural things. So, why did the blue goo dissolve the man and not the carpet?”

Narz didn’t fully understand the question, but raised an eyebrow anyway. “You tell me,” he asked.

“Can’t. It makes little sense. If this is either an acid or a strong base, the severe pH rating that can do this to a man...” she indicated the body, “... should do the same thing to the carpet.”

Now, Narz understood. “So, this shouldn’t be like this, right?”

“*Too* right!”

They drove back to the lab in silence.

When Anne arrived the next day and opened her lab, she discovered that—true to his word—Narz had arranged to have the man’s body placed in the isolation chamber. It—or what was left of it—rested on the cold, stainless steel table near the rear wall.

Anne inserted her hands into the mechanical “Waldoes” and moved them to take away the plastic covering.

As she whisked it aside, she was just in time to watch the entire upper-left portion of the body collapse in on itself, releasing a stream of blue-green ooze that overran the table and dripped onto the floor.

“*Yuck!*”

CHAPTER 2 /**ORBS OF SOLID BLUE**

THE AUTOPSY she performed brought more questions than answers.

The ooze, which she had decided to nickname “gooey” had evidently continued working its devastating destruction overnight. What had apparently ended at the man’s shoulder the previous day had continued to eat away—no, that wasn’t what it was doing—had continued to transform the flesh and bone.

Now, more than 40% of his upper torso had fallen victim to its effects including most of the head.

Anne decided that it would be best to take as many samples throughout the body as possible before trying to find a neutralizing agent.

Periodically, she would notice another rib detach from the breastbone and drop into the chest cavity until the breastbone itself became insubstantial.

Everything was videoed for future study.

By late afternoon she had harvested samples from eighty-three locations, had labeled them and placed them into cold storage.

A thought crossed her mind. “I wonder what heat or cold do to the process?”

She removed a fresh sample from an area currently under attack by the unknown substance. Half went into her autoclave where she tried temperatures ranging from 100°F up to 280°.

There was neither acceleration nor deceleration notable in the samples.

She turned to cold experiments.

This proved to give sudden results. As soon as the sample was reduced to below 5°F all signs of deterioration stopped. The gooey changed from its ‘normal’ medium blue to a stark white.

She use the lab’s microtome to slice several micro-thin samples and placed them into vacuum containers for use in the electron microscope.

One, she allowed to come back to room temperature. It immediately turned back to blue and started eating the flash again.

She discarded that sample.

Looking at the screen on the EM Anne could see both the cellular structure of the flesh as well as the crystalline formations of the gooey.

She turned to her computer was was so engrossed in research that she almost didn’t leave the lab in time to get home before her family.

Sandy and her friend Bashalli Prandit were waiting for her when she arrived.

“Hello, dear. Hello, Bashalli. How are your parents and your brother?”

“They are all very well, Mrs. Swift,” the beautiful Pakistani girl replied. “Father still talks about your fried chicken.”

Anne smiled. *I know why Tom is so enamored with her*, she thought. Tom had met Bashalli a few months before and the two had been dating ever since. She and Sandy were becoming more like sisters than friends.

“Bashi and I are going to drag Tom and Bud out to a evening picnic on Lake Carlopa, mom, so you won’t have to cook for us.”

“But, I assume that you will want me to make up a picnic supper for the four of you, correct?”

Sandy looked down at her feet. “Yeah,” she admitted looking back up and smiling. “You’re the greatest, mom!”

In the end, both girls assisted in the preparation of sandwiches, roasted and stuffed potato skins, and a fresh fruit cocktail with honey. Swinging the basket between them, they left an hour later.

Anne slowly shook her head marveling at how her daughter, and her son, had grown up so quickly. Watching them, she knew why she did the extra and secret work for the FBI.

She, Damon and Tom had a nice dinner that evening. All she had time for after helping the girls was to prepare a platter of leftovers from the previous two evenings.

After dinner both Tom and his father excused themselves and headed back to Swift Enterprises, the sprawling four-square-mile research and production facility owned by the Swift family.

This gave Anne the opportunity to do more research into the

mysterious death of the construction worker.

Several hours later she was nowhere near to finding any examples of other instances where the same tissue dissolving action had been noted.

She resolved to make a series of calls the following day to several colleagues who might be able to help her.

She wasn’t surprised to see the blue nodule sitting in the isolation chamber when she arrived. It showed almost no evidence of leakage no matter how she turned it.

As suggested by Agent Narz, there was a small amount of radiation registering in the overall isolation chamber. She moved the mechanical arms over to pick up the radiation meter. She smiled as she saw that the new instrument was one of the Swift RadMeters currently being produced by the Swift Construction Company.

More sensitive than a Geiger counter by a factor of almost 100X, and able to record a series of measurements around a large area and then print out a pin-point accurate map of any radiation, it was a wonderful, portable measuring device.

She set the unit on the floor in a far corner of the chamber and used the arm to press the ‘test’ button. Five seconds later a green LED lit on the panel. She picked the device up and moved it to the opposite corner and repeated the test.

A final test right up in front of the security window separating her lab from the chamber finished the process. She then pressed a button to perform the final computations.

A minute later a slip of paper was ejected from the front. She picked it up and held it near the window.

It showed that the chamber did, indeed, have a current source of radiation. It was the nodule, but not the body. In fact, as Anne was surprised to see, the remains showed absolutely no signs of radiation.

“Hmm,” she considered biting her lower lip.

She replaced the RadMeter in its cubby and shut the door. It would now be subjected to a thorough decontamination process so that it would never be a source of contamination in future tests.

She had the paper photographed for digital storage and then discarded the piece in the disposal chute.

Anne undertook a closeup scan of the orb using the high definition camera/computer system available to her. This provided microscopic details of the surface, magnified many times on the HD viewscreen.

She could see that the orb wasn't as perfectly smooth as it appeared. Indeed, it was pitted and dented as if it had been heavily mistreated.

“Not surprising,” she told Narz when he called for an update. “After all, it *was* buried for who knows how long. Is it too late to get any soil samples from around where it was discovered?”

“Well, yes and no,” he told her. “The other reason for my call was to tell you that the crew found a small cache of the things.

Probably at least fifteen or more. We've had the site cordoned off.”

“I'll go back right now,” Anne offered.

Narz strongly requested that she not be seen anywhere near the site. “We've picked up a reporter or two and I wouldn't want them to see you,” he told her.

She returned to her exam of the nodule. An hour later she was near to giving up for the day when she found the site of the attempt to drill into it. It was obvious that the contents had come out and then formed a tight plug, sealing itself.

Anne ordered a special seal device from the building's inventory. This could be sealed around any solid object, flat or rounded, and then provided an access to special tools that could pull out core samples and then seal everything inside.

It arrived ten minutes later in the chamber and Anne picked it up. She pressed it over the site of the first drill mark and then released the sealant. It would take an hour for it to cure properly, so she opted to head home for the evening.

The next day it had completely sealed the site. A pressure check—Anne attached a high-pressure air hose to a valve on the side and injected over 300 psi into the device—showed that it was stuck tight and completely sealed.

She then used a high-carbon steel, diamond-tipped drill which she inserted through the special fitting. It required more than a minute to show any sign of success.

Gosh, she thought. It must have taken Jeremy Glenn all night

to get through with his hardware store drill.

Twice she needed to stop and replace the drill bit. Heat and friction had worn the first one down after about 90-minutes and the second one an hour later.

The third one finally pierced the nodule's shell. Anne retracted the bit, sealed the valve, and watched as the blue gooeey seeped out of the hole and filled the sealant device.

The half-millimeter diameter of the drill bit had made only a very small hole. Depending on the viscosity of the contents, it should have required between one and five minutes to fill the small chamber inside of the seal. It required about fifteen minutes.

She made a series of notes and observations before trying to withdraw a sample.

This proved to be an easy task. Although not under any great pressure, the gooeey contents was pulled into the stainless steel syringe in just seconds.

Once resealed, Anne decided to test this orb—she would, after all, have others very soon—in the deep freeze.

A minute sample of the materials was injected into a container that was then placed in the electron microscope.

Anne wasn't surprised to detect a similar crystal structure from what she had sampled out of their victim. She also noted that the materials was mildly radioactive, but only about a half Angstrom, less that a glow-in-the-dark watch face emitted.

“Well, that's not the cause of anyone's death,” she dictated into her computer notes. “Time to see what you are.”

She retrieved another small sample and had it placed into the spectroscope for analysis.

“But, that,” she stated aloud to nobody, “does surprise me.”

The results showed that the contents of the orb was a ultra-pure form of liquid sodium.

“Now, I need help.”

Calling Agent Narz she requested that he locate and bring in an expert in sodium.”

“Salt,” he asked incredulously.

“No, Quimby. Salt is half sodium but also half chlorine. No sign of that. I need somebody who knows this stuff because it should be impossible for it to be in liquid form at room temperature. It generally requires about two hundred eight degrees Fahrenheit to get it to melt and then around eleven hundred fifty to get it to boil!”

“I'll get back to you tomorrow.”

“No you won't, Quimby. Tomorrow is Saturday and I don't do Saturdays! Besides. This is beginning to look a lot less like something that needs my specialty.”

He apologized for not realizing the day of the week, and promised to have someone at the lab no later than that next Monday. “Until you can give me a definitive answer about why our construction worker dissolved, it's still in your ballpark, Anne.”

Both Tom and his father had finished their current work out in New Mexico and would be home the entire weekend. Anne planned to suggest a driving trip out of town, perhaps to the neighboring county where an antique fair was going to occur.

Knowing of her interest, the entire family agreed to the trip. They had a fine time but ultimately found nothing to bring home.

Monday came and Anne walked into her lab to find a young woman sitting on a stool gazing into the isolation chamber which now housed seventeen of the orbs.

Turning, the woman introduced herself. "Hi. I'm Margie Turner. Agent Narz called and said you needed a sodium girl."

Anne introduced herself and then sat down. She inquired about how much Narz had told Margie about the current project.

"He just said that you had a batch of sodium-filled balls that needed an explanation." She shrugged indicating that she knew nothing more.

Anne gave her an edited version of the story, ending with, "So, I finally was able to get a sample from the first one on Friday. Here. Take a look at the spectro results." She called up the results from the computer.

Margie was noticeably disturbed. "That shouldn't be possible, Anne," she told the older scientist. "The temperature isn't anywhere near right."

"I know," Anne told her. "What we need to do is to find out why, and then to find out where it all came from. I hope you

can help."

She and Margie spend the rest of Monday examining in minute detail the sodium samples.

Their work continued well into Wednesday until Margie declared, "I'm just about stumped, Anne. The only thing I can tell you is that the sodium has been treated. My guess is that it was irradiated under extreme pressure."

"I'm trying to remember elemental chemistry. Refresh my memory, Margie. How is that accomplished. How much pressure?"

"Oh, only about a million atmospheres of pressure or so would do it. I'm not sure that is our answer."

She called up an electron scan and pointed at one set of crystals.

"See how these crystals all seem to be scrunched in on themselves? Sort of like small versions of the other sodium crystals?"

Anne did.

"My best guess is that this is a mixture. A small amount, probably less than twenty percent, of the overall mass was treated and then mixed with standard sodium at a temp high enough to make it a liquid, but I don't think high enough to get it boiling."

They discussed the physics behind such a process, but the big questions remained.

“Alright. Why and who?”

Neither of them could come up with any answers.

“I need to take tomorrow off, Anne,” her assistant told her before they left for the day.

“That suits me fine, Margie. I’ll catch up at home and then see you on Friday.”

Driving home, Anne considered asking her husband how someone could come up with a room-temperature liquid sodium and what they would do with it, but decided that it would raise too many questions.

She chose to go back to the lab the next day after all. She had a lot of research to do.

One line led her to the nuclear industry. Liquid sodium was frequently used in certain reactors to carry the heat away, rather than water. It didn’t corrode metal piping like water.

Another reference source discussed its possibilities as a weapon. Liquid sodium near its boiling point had the ability to ‘melt’ many kinds of other metals.

He was unsure which line of questioning to follow, but felt that the reactor coolant one might hold more promise.

Her phone rang.

“Anne,” Harlan’s voice said. “We have a *very* major problem here.”

“Where, Harlan,” she asked.

“Here at Enterprises. Turn on Shopton TV channel 2. You need to see this.”

She moved over to the television in one corner of the lab. Switching it on, she selected the named channel. A news-woman was talking loudly into her microphone trying to be heard over the crowd noise behind her.

“...so we really don’t know any more than that, Leslie. Here at Swift Enterprises, we have been refused admission to ask the necessary questions. Why are we finding out about this terrible nuclear accident from a private laboratory? Why are the Swifts and the police covering up the real and potential loss of life? And, why is the press being provided with nothing but lies? This is Trisha Nichols, reporting at the scene of this near riot.”

“Oh, dear,” Anne sighed.

CHAPTER 3 /**A CRUSHING DEFEAT?**

HARLAN Ames rushed into Damon and Tom's shared office. "You can probably hear the clamor, but have you seen the news?"

Anne's husband nodded his head. "We just turned the coverage off. How in the world could anyone believe that Swift Enterprises would be involved in something like this?"

"What I'd like to know," added Tom, "is how this news could have been released without our hearing anything previously. At least on other things that we have been wrongly blamed for, there has been some news story that preceded that."

Harlan looked at them both and said, "Listen. We all know that this has nothing to do with anything Swift Enterprises has in the works or anything in the past."

The two inventors agreed.

"Then, the first thing we need to do is issue a blanket denial of any knowledge. We also must demand that anyone bearing information about this comes forward so that we can know who has made such accusations."

Again, Damon and Tom agreed.

"But, what we absolutely don't want is for you two to get trapped by an uninformed and uncontrolled crowd right now. You let George Dilling and me work the news release angle, but first let me get you two out of here and home, pronto!"

In the end, Damon and Tom boarded a small helicopter and flew out of the grounds on the opposite side from the main gates. They landed at Shopton General Aviation across from the main airport and called for a taxi.

Arriving at the Swift home they were gladdened to discover that no reporters had yet surrounded the house.

Kissing his wife, Damon said, "I suppose you have seen the news?"

Anne nodded and hugged her husband. "How do things like this get out? And, why does everyone blame Swift Enterprises for anything out of the ordinary?"

"It's the price of fame and success, I guess," he replied.

After a solemn dinner, Anne made a decision. Although she knew she couldn't admit to her secret work, and that it would be best to not question him too hard, she would ask a few probing questions.

"Dear? I only caught a bit of the report. What is suppose to be in that hole?"

"Well, one report has it that a container of some glowing blue material was pulled out a week or two ago, and then it disappeared. 'Whisked away by mysterious forces,' or something."

"What would make it blue and glowing," she asked, hoping that she didn't go too far in her questions.

Damon didn't seem to notice, and replied, "Not too sure to tell you the truth. The thing that really bothers me is the whole ra-

diation angle. Hmm. I need to make a call.” He rose up and went to the kitchen.

Minutes later he returned and sat back down.

“I’ve just asked Harlan to organize a night overfly of that area with one of our Whirling Ducks outfitted with a Damonscope. That will give us a good indication of any radiation at that dig site.”

The Damonscope was a visual measuring device for the detection and plotting of anything other than normal background radiation. Her son had used one on his adventure to South America while testing out his Flying Lab.

Where the original model had relied on ultra-sensitive film, the newest model used visible and invisible light and radio waves and recorded everything digitally.

“Will you be able to tell what kind of radiation it is,” she asked.

“The ‘scope is sensitive enough that we should be able to get some good readings that will tell us if there is anything there plus the strength of the radiation. We might not be able to determine what it is exactly, though, unless it is a known radioactive substance.”

“Well, I don’t want you doing anything dangerous or having to deal with that mob outside of Enterprises. Perhaps you should contact the folks you know at the FBI or the Environmental Protection Agency or even the Nuclear Regulatory Commission?”

And that, she thought, will make sure that I get all the informa-

tion you come up with!

The next morning Shopton police had to be called to disperse a crowd of reporters and a few protesters so that Damon and Tom could leave the house unmolested. They provided an escort for Damon’s sedan right through the special private gate reserved for top Enterprise executives.

Within minutes of their departure everyone else had left, so the way was clear for Anne to leave.

She made a call to Agent Narz on her drive to the lab. “Just in case he doesn’t get in touch with you right away, Quimby, you need to call Damon and get him to share everything he knows or finds out.”

“What, Anne? Don’t you feel like quizzing him yourself,” he said sarcastically.

She didn’t laugh.

He hadn’t expected that she would.

Margie had arrived an hour earlier and was engaged in an experiment of her own when Anne arrived. She looked up as Anne entered the lab and smiled. “Morning.”

“Morning it is. Thank you for not saying that is is a good one,” Anne responded. “What have you got?”

“Not a lot. I’ve been doing some volume and density measurements on the sodium and have come up with conflicting results.”

“You’ve got my attention. What sort of results?”

“For one, there seems to be far too much sodium in the sodium.”

“That can’t be right, can it?”

“Not unless you think about other crystals, like sugar. Cold water can hold only so much dissolved sugar in it. The ability to maintain a suspension has its limits. But, you can super saturate the water with sugar if you bring it to a boil.”

“So,” Anne ventured, “are you thinking that this sodium was brought up to the boiling point and then had even more sodium introduced?”

“Logically, it has to be. And I would have thought that it would only make more of the liquid sodium until I took into consideration the smashed crystals in there. Somehow, they made more room for additional sodium in the same amount of space. Weird, huh?”

“Weird, and how,” Anne told her.

“I also found out that liquid sodium shouldn’t ever be blue.”

“Is there any sign of something else in there? Something that could cause the color,” Anne inquired.

“Nope. Just pure sodium, in liquid form, at room temperature. Impossible I would have thought.”

Anne asked, “What might have changed your mind?”

“It’s the difference between the full-size crystals and the crushed ones. Some sort of prismatic effect is causing a color shift in normal light. Watch this.”

Margie walked over and turned the overhead lights off. She then typed in a series of commands on her computer. The lights in the isolation chamber went out and were replaced by a deep violet light.

“Black light,” Anne asked.

Margie nodded. “Here comes the interesting part.” She typed another series of commands and Anne watched as one of the nodules was delivered into the chamber.

“Pink? It’s glowing bright pink,” Anne marveled.

“Yes, it is. And if I shift the light wavelength into infrared,” she changed the light source again, “it all goes a beautiful shade of orange.”

They watched the nodule as Margie dialed the light wavelength all the way through the spectrum, visible and invisible. It was only when the light was completely within the red spectrum that the orb matched its color to the light.

“Very interesting, Margie. I’m not sure that it helps us, but it certainly does bear up your theory of light refraction within the crystalline structure.”

“And, that means at least two different crystals.”

They were considering all of this when a call came in from Harlan.

“I hope this isn’t more bad news,” Anne told him.

“One the contrary, Anne. I just got off the phone with Quimby and he, in return, had just been speaking to you better half.”

“And?”

“And, the results of the night flight over the dig are in, and Damon has some theories that he shared with our agency friend.”

He told her of the Damonscope results. “It shows that there were seventeen hot spots, so that accounts for all of the orbs. The amount of radiation varies slightly, but is not much more or less than the first one.”

“Okay, so where does that leave us?”

“Firstly, we know that we have all of them in your possession, and that very little if any radiation leaked into the soil. Secondly, we know that the radiation level is slight, at the most. Thirdly, we have some interesting stuff from Damon.”

Damon Swift had informed Quimby Narz of the Damonscope findings and had then been asked to provide a “brain dump” of whatever he might be able to think that could be of help.

“He came up with a validating theory to yours that this sodium must be from the nuclear industry. No other source could have altered the sodium like this. He also offered to provide reference materials not publicly available regarding how the Citadel used a liquid sodium cooling system on one of their larger reactors last year.”

The information had been invaluable to Anne’s understanding of the properties of such sodium.

She and Margie spent the next two days pouring over everything Damon had sent to Narz that had then been forwarded to

Anne.

On the third day they sat down over a cup of coffee to discuss what they knew.

“I’ll start,” Anne offered. “We now know that there are instances where sodium can be superheated and then compressed that will allow it to take on additional sodium without increasing its volume. We also know that this is a very dangerous thing.”

Margie added, “And one of my experiments shows that this almost becomes an isotope of sodium and that it becomes increasingly unstable as it remains under heat and pressure.”

“We have the makings of a situation where someone or some company was performing secret nuclear experiments using this sodium goo to cool their reactor, then must have found out that it was becoming dangerous,” said Anne.

“Does Agent Narz know of any company that might have done this, Anne? Could it have been those folks at Swift Enterprises? You know, they have a nuclear facility out west. Maybe they have a secret one here in Shopton?”

Anne had never told Margie her last name and didn’t want to bring it up now. She silently counted to ten, then replied, “Quimby Narz has worked with them for a few years. If he is satisfied that they don’t have anything local, then I believe him. Implicitly. And he says that they have never discarded any materials out in New Mexico. They have a deep, lined bunker under their facility that is used for storing anything that they don’t want to get out.”

Margie considered this and then agreed that the Enterprises angle was probably just a bad rumor.

“Do we believe we know everything about the sodium now? Should we turn to trying to figure out the case?”

Margie thought and then nodded. “I’m pretty sure that we have nothing new to find out about the actual sodium. There just aren’t any markers that might help find out where it came from. Sodium is sodium!”

Anne made a phone call to locate the necessary equipment for getting a sample of one of the orbs. She decided that the first one, which had already been breeched, would be sacrificed.

The next morning a high-pressure device was delivered to the lab. It would be placed in the chamber with the first orb and be used to crush the orb. Anne’s research showed that their standard approach of using either a high-speed saw or laser cutter would cause too much heat and might cause a secondary reaction, even an explosion.

The other method of using extreme water pressure to cut, often used on metals, would definitely cause a problem. Sodium reacted violently when exposed to water.

So, Anne picked up the nodule and placed in in the cradle at the bottom of the crushing machine. She opted to send Margie into the hallway before activating the device. Once she pressed the button Anne also left the lab.

Their caution was unnecessary. When they returned a minute later the orb lay in two pieces with its contents having mostly spilled out.

She used the mechanical arms to reposition one of the pieces and then crushed it. This time it broke into more than twenty pieces.

She extracted one and prepared it for spectroscopic examination.

In less than an hour she and Margie reviewed the results. The shell was about an inch thick and was composed of a high-temperature polymer, a plastic capable of withstanding greater than 500°F. It wasn’t clear, but the blue nature of its content had shown through the opaque white material.

Anne began looking up suppliers of the material. There were more than a dozen in the north east alone. She started making phone calls.

Several were willing to reveal their customers, but none of those would have been involved in nuclear research.

Two had requested subpoenas before they would release such information. Anne arranged for them to be delivered the following Monday.

She discovered that three of the suppliers had gone out of business and hoped that they were not the suppliers for the orbs.

The final supplier was willing to provide his client list but then asked about the use of the materials. All Anne was authorized to release was that it was a shaped vessel. The supplier told her that his company only supplied flat sheet materials.

When Quimby finally sent her the lists from the subpoenaed companies she decided to scan down them. In seconds, she re-

ceived a great shock.

Right in the middle of the first list was *Swift Enterprises!*

CHAPTER 4 /

GENIE BACK INTO THE BOTTLE

MOMENTARILY devastated, Anne sat back and tried to think. *Surely, Damon wouldn't keep silent about something as important as this. Would he,*" she thought.

But then, why not? After all, she kept a huge secret from him.

She decided to ignore a gnawing feeling in the pit of her stomach and continue on with the lists.

Of all the companies listed only five were within two hundred miles of Shopton. Anne recognized all five. Two were direct competitors of Swift Enterprises.

She set the files aside and made several notes, then left for home.

Damon Swift arrived an hour later and in a decidedly unhappy mood.

"Can you image it, Anne," he said. "Quimby Narz—you've heard me speak of him before, right?" Anne nodded. "Well, that misery had the nerve to call me into FBI headquarters today to answer some pretty ridiculous questions!"

Anne bit her lip. She had hoped that her family would be spared any interrogation if she could only have the time to find the real source for the nodules. Narz had beat her to it.

"What sort of questions," she asked, trying to keep her voice level.

“The FBI has tracked down the material of those blue nodules and they are made from a plastic—which we use—that is readily available to just about anyone. Stuff called Fluorsite. It’s designed to resist high temperatures which is why we use it.”

Anne was reticent about asking the next question. She wasn’t sure she wanted to know the answer. “How do you use it, dear?”

“With the exception of a one meter square sheet that we accidentally burned through, Tom uses all that we bought in the Sky Queen. It’s part of the heat shield around the jet lifters.”

Anne almost had her legs collapse under her with the relief she felt.

“So, you told him?”

“I told him that and a few other things. The nerve of the man. It’s almost as if he is giving credence to that malicious rumor about Enterprises being involved in the nodule business. Humph!”

“I hope he’s satisfied,” Anne stated.

“Oh, more than satisfied. He actually apologized to me for making it sound like an accusation. He asked me who else around here might be using the stuff, so I gave him a couple company names.”

The next morning, and greatly relieved that she could cross Enterprises off of her lists, she arrived at the lab ready to try to find out the information that would help Narz and the FBI close in on the criminals.

She contacted her FBI liaison and told him, “Quimby. You absolutely have to get Enterprises off the hook on this. It isn’t fair that they are bearing the brunt of a phony news story!”

“Calm down, Anne,” he told her. “I would love to release a statement about Damon and Tom and how they have nothing to do with this, but I can’t. Until I can tell people who *is* responsible, how can I assure them that someone isn’t?”

“Agent Narz. I can give you a whole stack of reasons why, along with information to back it up. The very least you could do is to release a statement that says the stuff inside of the nodules isn’t radioactive.”

He considered her suggestion, then said, “Okay. Here’s what I’ll do. I’ll put out a statement that says the stuff inside is not radioactive, just highly corrosive. I can add that we have all of it from the dig site and are currently analyzing it to determine its source.”

“What about the Enterprises angle?”

“I know you don’t want to hear this, but we can’t clear them without presenting evidence. Keep working at it and we may get to clear them very soon.”

Although not entirely satisfied, Anne knew that it was the best the agency could do at this point.

She began reviewing her notes and making a few additions. A call to the state Bureau of Licenses resulted in her being provided the names of the owners of the defunct businesses that had ordered the polymer.

After adding that information to her notes she decided to try calling them.

She found out that one of the companies was actually an individual who had been a would-be inventor. He had passed away several years before but had only been involved in trying to come up with a substitute for asbestos. He had simply sold-through the material to others.

Companies number two and three were both arms of the same conglomeration. Both had been involved in supplying plastic molds for the food industry. Both had been closed a year earlier when the market had disappeared.

That left the active businesses.

They included a biomedical company that presumably used the materials for prosthetic limbs, and a battery manufacturer.

Anne felt that she needed to distance herself from the list for a few hours.

She turned back to the mess that had occurred when the first orb had been broken into pieces. The sodium had been in contact with the crusher but that plus all other pieces and the sodium had been collected right after the destruction and placed into a stainless steel container.

Although everything else had been removed, the container remained in the isolation chamber.

Anne considered leaving it there for another day but then relented and went to move it into a storage locker. She slipped her hands into the mechanical arm controls and reached for the

container.

A blindingly-bright spark arced between the container and the outstretched claws of the arms. Although well insulated, Anne received enough of a shock to knock her backwards and against her computer station.

When she could see again, she discovered that the claws at the ends of both pantograph arms had been scorched and partially melted.

Her hands were red where they had been in contact with the controls. She left the lab and went down the hall to the staff room where a first aid kit was stored.

“My god! Anne,” Patricia Rockwell, one of the agents who worked in the front ‘bank’ of the building. “What happened?”

Anne told her. Patricia insisted on calling Agent Narz and telling him of Anne’s accident. He told her to inform Anne that she was to leave everything exactly as it was and to remain in the break room. “Tell her that I’ll be there in five minutes!”

When he arrived he was able to determine that Anne’s burns were not damaging and they decided she could laugh them off as a ‘hot water accident’ with her family.

“Let’s take a look at your lab,” he suggested.

The arms hung limply behind the safety glass. The top of the container of orb ingredients was twisted and also burnt.

Narz used his shoe to switch off the arm controls. They both watched as the arms sagged closer to the container and then

saw the bright flash of a spark that shot between them.

“What the—” was all Narz could get out.

Anne, although greatly surprised was able to note that the spark had been considerably less intense than the one that burned her.

“Quimby,” she said. “I’m going to need another set of arms and these will need to have great big insulation covers and be grounded better than the current pair.”

“Okay,” he said with some reservation, “but why?”

“Because I think I may know what is going on here.”

“Good enough for me,” he told her. “Give me two days, okay?”

“Okay. See you on Friday.”

Anne left the lab and headed toward one of the other names on the lists provided by the polymer manufacturer. Two hours later she parked in their lot.

She breezed into the lobby of the Quik Battery Corporation in Plattsburgh, the primary competitor for low-cost power sources to Enterprises.

“May I assist you,” the pleasant but young receptionist asked.

Anne pulled out her FBI credentials. “I’m Barbara Boone,” she said, giving her cover name. “I’d very much like a moment with your president, Jayston York, *please*.”

Something in her tone told the young woman it would not be a good idea to inquire why. “Yes, ma’am.” She dialed a number and informed her boss of the FBI agent’s presence.

“How might I help our federal agent, miss...” he waited for Anne to say something. She merely held out her ID.

York swallowed nervously, and then continued, “Ah, yes. How might I personally assist you?”

“We are investigating a local matter that you may have heard of. The recovery of several strange orbs filled with radioactive, liquid sodium?” She watched his reaction.

At the mention of sodium, York had turned pale. He rallied quickly and the smile returned to his face, but he said nothing.

They played the waiting game for almost a minute before Anne decided to press forward. “Anyway, if you haven’t heard about it I suggest that you look in the papers several weeks back.”

Clearing his throat, York asked, “As I have heard nothing of the incident I must assure you that I will not be able to satisfy any of your questions.” He smiled, hopefully.

“Then I will come directly to the point. Does your company use the polymer, Fluorsite 500?”

His smile wavered a little. “Well, yes. As a matter of fact, we have begun using it to make cases for a new class of storage battery we have in development. Can’t talk about it. Hush-hush, you know?”

Anne tried to get more information from the man but he was skillful at skirting most of her questions.

“Funny thing is, we can’t find any records of you purchasing Fluorsite in the past year or more.” She raised an eyebrow at

him.

York gulped and began perspiring. He said nothing.

Finally she said, "Well, you have certainly been an absolute fount of non-information. You'll be hearing more from us, I promise," and left the building.

She was convinced that Quik Battery must be behind the orbs. She made a mental note to check whether sodium batteries were practical. If so, she believed she had identified the culprit.

Her efforts led her to an apparent dead end. Molten sodium could be used along with molten sulfur to make a battery, but it wasn't at all practical.

She decided to tell Quimby and Harlan about her snooping. Narz reminded her that her place was not in the field. "That's why I have over fifty agents in my district," he said.

Harlan had been tactful but firm. "Anne? Don't do that again. I can't imagine what would come down if you were to get hurt and your little secret found out."

"Don't you want to know why I went there," she asked the FBI agent.

"Okay. Tell me."

"That amazing electrical zap gave me the clue. The super sodium reacted with the stainless steel and generated electricity. I think it is all part of some battery experiment gone bad. And Quik Battery is the only company around here engaged in that business."

Narz admitted that he was impressed. "We'll keep our eyes and ears open regarding them. Thanks. But, my order to stay out of the field still goes. Let *us* do the investigative work. *You* let us know if you find anything useful."

He told her that he could be relied upon to pass on everything.

She gave in and promised to stay away from suspected companies or persons.

The following morning as she was finishing the breakfast dishes her cellphone rang.

"Anne? It's Harlan. We did a lot of digging yesterday based on your info and came up with the following. We still don't know who produced our super sodium, but we know who spread the rumors that it was deadly radioactive and that it came from Swift Enterprises."

"I don't need suspense right now, Harlan. Who?"

"The tip-off to the news agencies came from Quik Battery Corp. We can't pin it on their president because the information came in the form of letters with a phony signature. A handwriting expert says it is probably a woman and most likely fairly young."

Anne told him about the receptionist.

He promised to have Narz check her out.

Six days came and went with no word from Narz. Finally, Anne called Harlan to inquire.

"I'll make a call, Anne, but I don't think we are going to like what we hear."

Anne asked what he meant, but Ames could only tell her that the "grapevine" was vibrating with disturbing news.

"We've found our guilty party, Anne," Narz told her when he reached Anne the next afternoon..

He related how the FBI had visited Quik Battery Corporation in force. Almost immediately on their arrival the receptionist had broken down and admitted that she had been ordered to spread the rumors about Swift Enterprises.

Anne was furious on hearing about this.

Quimby asked her to bear with him.

"It goes much deeper than any of us realized, Anne. Sure, that guy York is a jerk and I wouldn't blame Damon if he sued the pants off of the son-of-a-gun, but as I said, it goes a lot deeper."

It turned out, he said, that Quik Battery had developed the super sodium and had attempted to build a long-term storage battery using it, "but it was for Uncle Sam, Anne. The DOD hired them five years ago to make the stuff. Where they ran into problems was that they figured they could get rid of the stuff on the cheap once the project finished."

"Quimby," Anne said with a note of anger in her voice, "you can't tell me that the idiots at Quik have or had the facility to make the stuff. It would require a major reactor and an equipment set-up of millions of dollars. So where did it *really* come from?"

"I can't tell you," he replied.

"Can't, or won't?"

"Yes... well... all I can say is that it was developed in the US by the Department of Defense through a contract with a north-east nuclear facility that is no longer in operation. Please don't ask for more."

"I can guess where that was," she commented.

"Anyway, York got the contract to try to turn it into batteries. A couple million dollars of tax money was tossed at it before he gave up and the contract lapsed.

Narz explained that York had decided that paying many thousands of dollars for the proper destruction or storage of the sodium was more than he wanted to pay. He had unnamed employees take the storage vessels—the no-longer-mysterious nodules—to the site of the old glassworks where they discovered an old underground vault.

The nodules had been placed in it and then covered by dirt.

"Nobody could have thought that the new City Hall would be built there."

"What happens now," Anne asked. She realized that any further questioning would be deflected as 'National security' or the like.

"York has agreed to make a public apology for the accusations regarding Enterprises and he will also take back and properly dispose of the sodium. In return, we have agreed to not prosecute him. Mr. Glenn had no relatives so York has agreed to

make a sizable donation in his name to the union's Widows and Orphans fund."

"So, that's it?"

"That's as far as we can take this one. Unfortunately, sometimes we can't nail the bad guys. By the way. Did you ever figure out why Glenn dissolved?"

"That's easy. The sodium reacted with the water in his body little by little and actually very slowly burned through him. If someone had lit a match near the body the hydrogen gas being produced would have burned."

"So, why didn't that carpet piece get destroyed," asked Quimby, remembering one of Anne's first samples.

"Even easier. The carpet, although it is a natural fiber, had no moisture in it. The sodium and body goo never got it wet enough for any reaction."

"Ah," Narz told her as he walked out the door. "I knew it would be something easy like that!"

Anne went home and sat back with much satisfaction as she listened to the news that evening.

"This is Trisha Nichols reporting near the main gate of Swift Enterprises, where this reporter and many like me owe an apology to the Swift organization for jumping to conclusions a few weeks back. It appears that we must now retract our assertions that...

FROM THE SAME AUTHOR

Coming Soon...

