



©opyright 2011 by the author of this book (T. Edward Fox - pseud.). The book author retains sole copyright to his or her contributions to this book.

This book is a work of fan fiction. It is not claimed to be part of any previously published adventures of the main characters. It has been self-published and is not intended to supplant any authored works attributed to the pseudonomous author or to claim the rights of any legitimate publishing entity.

SWIFT ENTERPRISES PRESENTS

Bashalli Prandit— **All American (Pakistani) Girl**

By T. Edward Fox

Tom Swift doesn't know it, but something is about to hit him. And, his younger sister, Sandy is the one who is going to make sure it happens.

Sandy has met and made friends with an older girl, one who she has the absolute certainty is **THAT GIRL**. The one meant for her brother. The one who must be introduced to Tom, no matter what it takes.

There are only four things in the way. Tom is way too busy with his inventions at Swift Enterprises. Bashalli is a full time worker plus a full time student. Her parents want her to date and marry a Pakistani man. And, neither one of them is looking for a relationship.

With the resolve of someone who knows that her way is the right way, Sandy sets about getting the two of them together.

This book is dedicated to Scott Dickerson who had the strength to do what a lot of people wanted to do, but couldn't: give Tom Swift a girlfriend worthy of the young inventor and his equal in brains, gumption and sense of adventure. While some may yearn for the Tom Swift Jr. version of the world that featured Phyllis Newton, I prefer the spicier and infinitely more interesting Bashalli. Thank you, Scott.

Bashalli Prandit— All American (Pakistani) Girl

FOREWORD

Okay. Let's get something straight right up front. I created Tom Swift, Jr. and he had a girlfriend named Phyllis. Mea culpa!

A product of the times, Tom and Phyllis had what might be best described as a “so chaste they might as well be related” relationship. Holding hands? Sure. Dancing? Certainly. Kissing?

Good golly, NO! There was a lot of “dating,” but nothing so bold as even a goodnight kiss. And, that is a real pity.

In the revitalized *Tom Swift Lives!* adventures, thankfully time and bravery edited and changed many things, including the girl Tom spends his off hours with. Truth be told, Bashalli Prandit is the sort of young woman I only wish Tom could have been involved with way back then.

Now, someone had given us the back story about how Bashi came to meet the person who would prove instrumental in getting her together with Tom.

Do not lament the loss of Phyllis; celebrate the advent of Bashalli and all she brings to Tom's life.

Victor Appleton II

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Chapter		Page
1	My New Favorite Hangout	3
2	Priming The Pump	6
3	Finally. In the Same Room!	10
4	A Little Push	14
5	Sparks	18
6	“I Really Care For Him”	21

CHAPTER 1/**My New Favorite Hangout**

A PRETTY blonde-haired girl walked absently down the street in her home town of Shopton, New York. It was a warm summer day, and she had finished her junior year of high school just three days earlier. Summer and freedom. No more pencils, no more books... or so the old chant goes.

That also meant no more daily get togethers with her friends. Far too many of them had immediately left town with their parents for a summer vacation and would not be back for several weeks.

Now, she was getting bored.

Sandy Swift, daughter of the eminent inventor and scientist, Damon Swift and younger sister—but only by eleven months!—of Tom Swift, had left her house hours earlier when her mother had shoed her from the kitchen.

“If you’re going to mope around after just a couple days, then I want you out in the sunshine and not under my feet!” her mother had chided her. Gently, as she realized Sandy always spent the first few weeks out of school feeling a little melancholy.

By now, Sandy had walked through the park next to the business district of town, looked without enthusiasm at shop windows—and anyone who really knew Sandy could tell you how strange *that* was—and had even explored an area several blocks off the beaten path where new boutique-style shops had been springing up in the past several years.

She stopped, leaning up against the plexiglass enclosure of one of Shopton’s bus stops. It was getting hot and she realized that she was both hungry and thirsty. She could walk back to her little scooter, a, underpowered Vespa knock-off, and drive home, or she could explore a little coffee shop she had just noticed across the street.

The sign indicated it was called The Glass Cat. *Interesting name*, she thought as she crossed the street.

The door opened as she approached and she could hear the sound of a small tinkling bell. A man came out carrying a small bag. She noticed that it smelled delightfully of cinnamon. As she entered, two things made an immediate impact. The aroma of freshly baking pastries assailed her nose, in a very nice way, and her eyes were immediately drawn to the beautiful girl behind the counter.

Dark-haired, dark eyes and the kind of light mocha skin blonds can only dream of achieving, Sandy had to admit that this young woman was the most stunning person she had seen in and around Shopton.

“Hello,” the girl greeted Sandy. “Welcome to The Glass Cat. I believe that you are new so please feel free to take a look around and ask any questions you might have. My name is Bashalli.”

“Oh. Um, well... hi. My name is Sandy.” Sandy was practically at a loss for words. “Uh... thanks.” She moved to one side to allow another customer to approach the counter. Sandy scanned the hand-drawn white board above the front counter. Interspersed with all of the drinks and foods on offer were small yet incredibly beautiful drawings.

Finally, once the latest customer had been served, she approached the counter. “Hi, again, Basha... uh... Bashil... oh nuts! How did you say your name?”

The girl smiled and said, “Bashalli. Very similar to saying ‘bash’ and ‘ally’ together. My friends and my mother call me Bashi.”

“Oh. Sort of like my full name is Sandra, and my friends and family call me Sandy. Although, my brother and boyfriend sometimes call me San. Do people call you Bash?”

The girl blushed. It served to give a warm, reddish glow to her light brown complexion.

“Did I say something wrong?” Sandy asked seeing the other girl’s expression.

“No. It is just that the shortened form, Bash, is the more... well, it’s an intimate form of address. Something a husband or boyfriend might call me.”

“Oh.”

“What can I make for you, Sandra?” She noticed that Sandy was gazing over her head, eyes wide with wonder. “Is there something wrong?”

“I’m just in awe of all the beautiful drawing up on the board,” Sandy admitted, still trying to figure out what she wanted. She let her gaze drop down until she was staring at Bashalli’s face.

“Why, thank you. I did those.”

Sandy realized that she was now staring at the girl and blinked.

Noticing Sandy’s expression, Bashalli asked, “Is there something wrong with me?”

“No. It’s just that you have to be the most beautiful girl I’ve ever seen!”

Now, it was Bashalli’s turn to stare. “Uh... I’m not sure... I mean, thank you, but...”

Sandy turned beet red. “I’m so sorry. I was just admiring you in the way a jealous blonde who will never have as wonderful a complexion as you do does. That doesn’t sound right. I mean, I was just looking at your beautiful skin and coloring. It is just that you are so stunning.”

“Do not sell yourself short, Sandra. You are beautiful and fair in a way that someone of my heritage can only look at and dream about. Can you imagine me with your silky blond hair?”

The two girls laughed at the image.

“Or, my light skin with your hair and eyes. Actually,” Sandy stopped and considered something, “If we could put your dark

eyes in my head and my blue ones in yours...” she left the rest unfinished. “Anyway. You can call me Sandy. Okay?”

“Yes. And you can call me Bashi. Let me buy you something,” Bashalli told her. “I’m about to have my break. If you don’t mind, I’d love to have the chance to talk. I get very little time to just chat with someone about my age.”

Sandy ordered a medium mocha latte and a small apricot pastry. She sat at a table near the front window and nibbled and sipped for five minutes before a dark, slightly older man came out from the back to give Bashalli a break.

Sitting down with Sandy, she let out a sigh. “It feels good to be able to sit for awhile. You don’t mind, do you?”

“Oh, golly, no,” Sandy exclaimed. “With school out I’ve just been knocking around with nothing to do and nobody to talk to. I’m glad for the company.”

They chatted for a few minutes before Sandy got up the nerve to ask, “Can I ask you about where you come from? I mean, you have such beautiful, dark features like I’ve never seen before.”

Giving a small smile and shake of her head, Bashalli told her, “Where I came from, I would be considered pale. My family originally lived in a city of Pakistan called Rawalpindi. That’s about twenty miles from the capital city. My father worked for the local government, specifically for the people representing the ruling party in that area. When I was just ten we had to leave. In looking back, it was more of an escape. Father found himself on the wrong side of a political upheaval.”

Sandy was aghast. “What would have happened if you stayed?”

“My belief, now that I have been able to study the history of that region and those times, tells me that he might have been put in prison at best, or even—” she stopped, unable to form the words.

Sandy placed a hand on Bashalli’s forearm. “I’m sorry, Bashi. I didn’t mean to dredge up bad memories. Sorry.”

Shaking her head, Bashalli took Sandy's hand in hers and gave it a small squeeze.

"No. Do not worry. These are things that are facts and are in the past. Anyway, we came to Shopton straight from Pakistan. Father had a contact inside the U.S. Embassy who set up everything for us. Do you know what the worst part of getting here was?"

Sandy nodded.

"We had to drive at night with the lights off in the little truck my father had to steal to get us away. No lights, a bad exhaust system and hotter than one hundred degrees even at midnight. I was sick for days."

All too soon, Bashalli looked at the clock and then at the disapproving glare of the man behind the counter. She got up.

"Sorry, Sandy. I have to go back to work. My brother hates being out front. He is an excellent baker but is sadly lacking in some of the social graces." She smiled. "If you can stay for awhile, we close at five. I'd really like to talk some more. It is so nice to have someone to talk to who isn't a teacher or family."

Sandy agreed to remain. In truth, she was such a social person that even one day without some sort of interaction could drive her practically crazy.

For a few hours she filled her time people watching, reading many of the magazines and newspapers present, and in sneaking glances at Bashalli.

When closing time came, Bashalli's brother stalked out of the door without acknowledging Sandy's presence. She got up and walked to the counter.

"Anything I can do to help?" she offered.

"Well, I need to clean the espresso machine and sweep up. The machine is slightly dirtier but it's much easier to do than the sweeping. Could you do that?"

Sandy was glad for something to do. After a brief tour of the

machine, she set to work and quickly had everything scooped, wiped and steamed clean.

Bashalli finished her sweeping and came over to admire Sandy's work. "Amazing. That is probably the cleanest it has ever been. Thank you!"

After locking the door, the two girls walked to few blocks to the city park. On the way Sandy called her mother on her cell phone. "I'm going to be late, Mother," she said. "I've made a new friend. I'll try to be home before dark. Bye!"

They sat on one of the many park benches and talked about their lives.

Sandy was surprised that she had never seen Bashalli in the nine plus years the girl had lived in Shopton.

"I was home schooled until the tenth grade," the Pakistani girl informed her. "Then, I finished the last three years at Shopton High in just two years. I didn't have many friends and had to go to my brother's shop right after school and on weekends. As soon as I graduated I enrolled in Art College. So, it is still a lot of school, work, and home for me."

"Did you ever meet my brother, Tom?" Sandy asked. A little scheme was beginning to brew in her mind.

"Uh, Tom who?"

"Oh, dear. I never told you. My last name is Swift. Tom Swift."

Bashalli's eyes went wide. "The Swifts that have that enormous industrial complex on the other side of town?"

Sandy nodded. She really hoped that it wouldn't change the other girl's attitude. It often did with new people she met.

"I'm sorry. I don't believe I ever did meet him. I must have seen him. If you are seventeen and I am twenty and he is in between us, you would think we would have crossed paths at some point. But, no. I don't think I could pick him out of a group of ten people unless all the others were girls."

They shared a laugh at the thought of Tom standing amidst a group of girls and Bashalli having problems identifying him.

“Oh, and Sandy? I have had more fun today than I have for a long time. I want you to be my friend and hope you feel the same.”

Sandy stopped and gave Bashi a little hug. Stepping back, she said, “I’d love to be friends, Bashi. And, I’d love to come down to the coffee shop as often as I can. I like it. You and your brother have made it a really cozy and bright and interesting place to be.”

Bashalli, who had momentarily been a little shocked at receiving a hug, recovered and smiled. “You are always welcomed at The Glass Cat. Friend!”

CHAPTER 2/

Priming The Pump

THE NEXT evening at the Swift dinner table, Sandy sat looking at her brother, trying to see him as someone else might. Perhaps, someone like, for instance, Bashalli Prandit. Maybe.

Several times he caught her staring and scowled at her. Finally, on the fifth occasion he turned to face her. “What in the heck are you staring at, San? Do I have food stuck to my face? Something hanging out of my nose? What?”

Sandy shook her head. “Nothing, brother dear. Just looking at my genius sibling.”

He looked askance at her, then shook his head and went back to finishing the chicken cutlet on his plate.

Sandy’s mother, Anne, nudged her daughter under the table. When Sandy looked at her, Anne opened both eyes wide and raised one eyebrow. It was her way of silently asking ‘What is going on?’

Sandy rolled her eyes and mouthed the word, “Later.”

After dinner, she helped clear the table and assisted Anne in cleaning up. In the kitchen, with Tom and his father, Damon, in the living room watching a new situation comedy program, Anne asked, “So, what was all that staring about?”

Sandy furrowed her brows before replying. How to put it? “Well, the girl I told you about? The one I met yesterday? She is just gorgeous and only a little older than Tom and she doesn’t have a boyfriend and she is really interesting and I really think that she and Tom would be absolutely perfect for each other if only I can figure a way to get them together. See?”

Anne smiled. She remembered being a teenage girl and how everything seemed so vitally important one day only to be

forgotten the next week.

“Why, of course, dear,” she said. “But why the staring?”

“I need to see Tomonomo like Bashi will see him. I mean, he’s my brother and I love him, but will she think he’s dreamy or a dud? Will she even want to try to get to know him? I was just trying to put myself in her place seeing him for the first time.”

“Any luck?”

“Not really,” Sandy said a little dejectedly. “Just about the time I started to see him as a new person, he would turn and glare at me. Or, I’d remember him when he was ten and acting kind of goofy. Or something like that.”

“Well, let me tell you. Your brother is a very handsome young man. I’m certain your friend will like what she sees. The only problem is—” She bit her lip, unsure whether she should say anything even slightly negative about her own son.

“Were you going to say the problem is that he doesn’t have time for anything except his dumb inventions?”

“I was going to be a bit more tactful, but basically, yes. I do not want you to repeat this but I sometimes wish he found girls just a bit more fascinating. That seems to be the Swift men for you. Of course I am not promoting promiscuity, but I assume that you and Bud have kissed. Wait. I’m not sure I want to know,” she said seeing the sudden red face her daughter was sporting. “I’m not sure Tom *has* kissed a girl. It’s just that the Swift women seem to be the ones to make the first move. The men just sort of follow along and learn to enjoy the ride.”

Sandy’s eyes went wide at that comment.

Now it was Anne’s turn to redden. She cleared her throat.

“Well, anyway, I know I had to be the one to initiate the first kiss with your father, and the one time I talked to your

grandmother about, uh, relations—and that was only after she had several sherries—she admitted that she momentarily became the hussy and kissed your grandfather first.” She sighed. “It’s just going to take the right girl to bring Tom out, I suppose.”

Sandy sighed.

Meanwhile, in the Prandit kitchen, Bashalli and her mother were washing the dishes in silence. Finally, her mother spoke, “Bashi, my daughter. You were oddly silent at dinner both last evening as well as tonight. Is everything alright with you?”

Bashalli shrugged. Her mind had been replaying her conversations with Sandy. She genuinely liked the blond girl and thought they might become good friends. There was just one problem...

“Mother,” she said quietly. “I have made a new friend.”

“The blond American girl your brother told your father about? You know that Moshan doesn’t approve. I only wish, for his sake, that we had left Pakistan a few years earlier. Being almost sixteen when we did leave, he had become used to the old ways. He holds out hope that we might arrange a marriage for you, very soon, with a Pakistani man.”

Bashalli backed up from the sink and shook her head.

“Now, my daughter. I know and you know that you are more American than Pakistani. Even your stubborn father has admitted to me, privately of course, that his hopes of a Pakistani groom for you are quickly fading. Neither of us want to have to call the locksmith to get you out of your room again like we did three years ago when Moshan brought home that horrible spotty boy, whatever his name was. Kadar or Qandar or something. It makes me shudder when I think of that face.”

They both had a stifled laugh at the memory. The boy had been a recent immigrant and had never practiced good hygiene. He smelled of stale sweat and his face was a mass of

pimples, pockmarks and discoloration.

“I like this girl, Mother. Her name is Sandy and she is a very bright girl even though she is a few years younger. I need a friend. I have almost nobody I spend any time with other than you and father and Moshan. Outside of my school time, of course. Sandy and I hit it off immediately. Can you please tell Moshan to back off? To allow me to make my own friends? If he doesn't, I will have to quit working for him and find another job, one that might keep me away from the house much, much more than now.”

She knew that her mother hated the idea of Bashalli ever leaving. Like her daughter, circumstances and tradition kept her from being free to make whatever friends she cared to when they first arrived. In recent years she had been more insistent on being allowed a social life. She knew how important such freedom was to her daughter.

“My daughter. Tread carefully around Moshan. He is slowly coming to recognize the ways of our adopted country. Just, not yet. Remember. He is the only one of us who did not become a naturalized citizen.”

They stood, looking at each other for several moments before turning off the sink and going out to the family living room.

The following day Sandy breezed into The Glass Cat at 4:00. Instead of Bashalli behind the counter, Moshan stood there. “She is not here today,” he told her in a slightly sullen tone of voice. “She has evening classes at that drawing school on Thursdays. If you must see her, she will be here tomorrow at six. In the morning.”

With that, he turned away and started wiping down the large espresso machine. Sandy stuck her tongue out at him, not realizing that he could see her in the reflection of the chromed machine she had so recently made bright and shiny. His shoulders stiffened, then relaxed and he made a grumbling noise.

Sandy left.

After dinner that evening, the Swifts were sitting around the table enjoying a card game when the alarm system went off. Because of several intrusions and break-ins, Tom and Damon had designed and installed a perimeter alarm system. Only friends and family wore special watches with deactivator coils. Anyone else entering the property set off the alarm.

Tom and his father jumped to their feet. Father hurried to the den to check to make sure all of the outside lights had automatically turned on while son went to the panel next to the front door. It showed a single light. One person in front of the house. He opened the peephole and saw a large, swarthy man standing there.

Tom pressed the intercom button. “Yes? May I help you?”

The well-hidden peephole showed him that the man was now unsure of what was happening. He opened his mouth, closed it, and then said, “I have come to make an apology to the blond girl, Sandra. I was rude to her today in my coffee shop.”

Sandy had heard the voice and came to the door. Seeing who it was, she reached past Tom and opened the door. “Hello. It's Moshan, isn't it?”

Head slightly bowed, Bashalli's brother nodded. “Yes, Miss Swift. I must apologize to you for my behavior both the other day as well as today. My mother has informed me that I am in the wrong to be trying to stand in the way of Bashalli having new friends.” He looked like he wanted to say something else, but was unable to find the words.

“Won't you please come in?” she invited him sweetly.

Moshan looked first at Sandy and then at Tom. Tom stepped aside and said, “Yes. Please come in. You can meet our parents.”

As the tall man moved past them, Tom looked at Sandy

questioningly. She shrugged.

“Mother. Daddy. This is Moshan Prandit. He is the older brother of my new friend, Bashalli. Moshan owns a wonderful coffee shop downtown called The Glass Cat. Best apricot pastries I’ve ever had.”

Moshan brightened at the compliment. He looked at Sandy and nodded. “Thank you for your kind words.” Turning to the older Swifts, he continued, “I regret that I allowed my beliefs get in the way of being polite to your daughter. She and my young sister appear to be getting to be friends and I was... well... I was bothered about it. It is not the Pakistani way.”

Mr. Swift, who had risen and shaken Moshan’s hand, said, “I understand how customs can differ and how feeling about adhering to those customs and traditions can be very difficult to put aside. I am sure that your apology is completely accepted by Sandy and that there are no ill feelings. Right, Sandy?”

“Absolutely. I just want to be Bashi’s friend, and I think she wants to be mine.”

Moshan nodded. “I understand. Please come in at any time you wish. I also understand that it is you I should thank for the excellent cleaning and polishing job performed on my espresso machine. I thought that Bashalli had become crazed and cleaned it more thoroughly than ever before. It was only today that she told me it was you. Thank you.” He turned to leave.

Sandy escorted him to the door. “Thank you, Moshan,” she told him. “I appreciate how difficult it must have been to come here.”

He nodded again and departed.

The card game now forgotten, Anne and Sandy went to the kitchen to make coffee and chocolate milk.

“I’d say that is one obstacle down. Point to Sandy,” Anne told her. “What’s next?”

“Now that it’s okay for me to be friends with Bashi, all I have to do is get her and Tom together. I’m certain they’ll like each other.”

Anne nodded. “We’ll see.”

It was a full three days before Sandy got up the nerve to bring up the subject of her brother.

As she suspected, he was noncommittal about it. “You know I’m really swamped with finishing the Flying Lab, San. Maybe after that.”

She retreated to her room to consider her options.

“Bashi?” Sandy asked the next afternoon.

“Yes? What is on your mind?”

“Well, just like you, I have an older brother. Tom. The one you’ve never met. He’s a really super guy and I’m sure you’d like him. Is it too strange for me to try to set you up on a date with him?”

Bashalli pondered the question.

“The difficulty is much greater than your might believe, Sandy. It is one thing for my family to accept my making friends with a... uh... a non-Pakistani. It would be quite another thing, a *very big* other thing, for me to announce that I was going on a date with your brother. And, that supposes that I even find that I like him.”

Sandy and Bashalli sighed.

“It isn’t that I would not be open to dating your brother. Really it is not that. I have had very few dates and believe I am missing something very good. It is a level of terror I feel at the thought of bringing up the subject with my family. My mother might resign herself and understand, after a period of adjustment, but both Moshan and my father scare me

whenever I think of their reaction to me dating anyone they do not find for me. It's the old 'arranged marriage' thing. Big in the old country. Very, very small in Bashalli's world of today!"

Sandy quickly went over many of her schemes in her head before trying one out on Bashalli.

"Bashi? What would happen if Tom just happened to come into The Glass Cat? I mean, it wouldn't be like I dragged him there or anything. And, it wouldn't be like setting you up on a date. Just give you a little look at him and let him see how beautiful you are." She looked hopefully at her friend.

Bashalli slowly shook her head, but she did so with a slight smile playing around her lips. "I am not sure—"

They discussed the matter until Bashalli told her, "It would be better if you were not involved in my meeting your brother. If, and I really *mean* if, he comes in, I will take my look. And another big if, *if* he likes me *and* we hit it off, then there is a slight possibility that I might convince my family to allow me to perhaps have a cup of coffee with him. Possibly even somewhere other than my brother's shop."

She waggle a finger at Sandy, a gesture she had only learned a few months earlier, and one she wasn't entirely certain meant what she thought it might.

"Promise me that you will allow 'things' to progress on a natural path, Sandra Swift. Promise?"

Sandy crossed her heart with her right index finger while keeping her left index and middle fingers crossed behind her back.

"Promise, Bashi!"

CHAPTER 3/

Finally. In the Same Room!

THE TWO friends spent as much free time as Bashalli could manage together. Sandy took Bashalli shopping, including window shopping, a concept the Pakistani girl was unfamiliar with but found she greatly enjoyed.

For her part, Bashalli introduced Sandy to the two family operated restaurants in the area that specialized in Pakistani foods. Though often spicier than she was used to, Sandy found that she liked the unfamiliar mix of spices and the aromas that made her mouth salivate before even walking through the establishment's doors.

After more than a month, Sandy's frequent date—and, she hoped he considered himself her boyfriend—Bud Barclay began to complain.

"Jetz, Sandy. It used to be if I let a week go by without asking you out, you'd be angry with me. So far this summer, I've had one lunch date with you. Who is this new friend of yours? Is it really a she? I mean, you haven't found another guy, have you?" He genuinely seemed concerned for their relationship.

"Bud Barclay. I swear. You're the only guy in my life. Really. It's just that I have this new girlfriend. She's a great girl and I really like her."

She proceeded to spend an hour telling Bud all about Bashalli and her family and the traditions standing in the way of getting her and Tom together.

"That's where you come in," she concluded. "And, there will be a very nice reward for you if you pull this one off!"

They talked about what Sandy thought should happen and Bud offered a few tips and alternate possibilities. In the end it was decided that Bud would lure Tom to The Glass Cat in the

near future, sometime just before Bashalli's normal break time.

An hour before lunch a week later Bud dropped by Tom's underground hangar office and lab. As he walked across the hangar floor he reached up and patted the nearly complete giant aircraft housed there. "Hey, girl," he told the triple-decked jet. "Looking good!"

Entering the lab he hailed Tom who was inside of the small containment chamber in one corner.

"Yo. Skipper!" he called out. The soundproofing kept Tom from hearing him, but Bud's jumping around and waiving of his arms did get his attention. He stepped out and took off the work gloves he was wearing.

"What's up, flyboy?" he asked.

"Got a hot new tip from some of the guys over in engineering. Great little pastry place downtown. I'm free the rest of the day and think you should be, too. You know. All work and no play, et cetera..."

Tom grinned. It had been many days of continuous work recently for the eighteen-year-old inventor. He desperately wanted to complete his giant flying lab jet, but he realized the truth in Bud's statement.

"Sure. Only thing is I'm supposed to be giving a lecture at the Shopton Rotary Club meeting during the lunch hour. Come along and have some rubber chicken and soggy peas, then we'll go have some good food like a cherry danish or something. Give me ten minutes to clean up and we can head downtown."

Thirty minutes later they had parked and were entering the restaurant where the lunch and lecture were taking place. After signing in and taking a nametag, and then paying for Bud's lunch, Tom went to the head table and introduced himself. Ninety minutes later they left, walking the five blocks to the shop Bud had suggested.

Tom looked at the sign on the door and something almost registered, but he walked inside not knowing what it might be.

With the lunch crowd gone, the place was empty except for an attractive girl behind the counter. She looked up, smiling, and then blushed slightly under her dark complexion.

As she approached the counter she asked, "How may I help you two?"

Tom noticed that she was even more stunning up close. They placed their order and she moved to the gleaming coffee machine.

Moments later she pushed a tray bearing two steaming coffees across the countertop, eyeing the two young men standing in front of her.

Casually, as if they were already deep in a conversation she said, "So, you're the famous Tom Swift!" Tom's jaw dropped slightly.

Bud seemed on the verge of breaking out laughing.

Bashalli took a closer look at Tom's close-cropped blond hair and deep-set blue eyes. *He's more slender, like a swimmer or a runner than I thought he'd be*, she thought to herself, *but I like his looks. Very self-assured even if he seems to be struggling for something to say right now.*

"Um, yes, that's right," replied Tom. "I mean—about my name, not the famous part. I'm not *famous*."

"Not *yet*," interjected Bud. "But just wait until the world sees that new Flying Lab of yours!" After a moment of awkward silence, Bud suddenly whacked the back of his hand against his forehead. "Oh, sorry—manners! Miss Bashalli Prandit, allow me to introduce my good friend Mr. Thomas Swift. Mr. Swift, Miss Prandit."

Tom shook Bashalli's hand as a grin broke out on his face.

"Pleased to meet you. Bud here makes it his personal mission to introduce me to—to—"

"To all the pretty young girls in Shopton?" Bashalli smiled reassuringly. "It's really a nice compliment, isn't it? And I *have* wanted to meet you, Thomas Swift."

Tom looked blank. "You have? By the way, how *did* you know my name?"

"You mean, besides the fact that you look just like your pictures in all the papers? Besides the fact that you came in with Bud Barclay, who promised to bring you by?" Bud blushed. He had thought Sandy wanted to keep his involvement secret from Bashalli. "Besides—this?" She pointed a delicate finger at Tom's chest and he tilted his chin down to look.

"Oh, right," said Tom. "My name tag. We were just leaving from a lecture up the street when Bud said we should—"

"*And* here we are," finished Bud. "I told Tom The Glass Cat has the best fresh-brewed coffee in town."

Finally it hit Tom. "Of course! You're Sandy's new friend. Right?"

Bashalli nodded and smiled.

As Tom and Bud went to a table, they invited her to join them. After looking to see that her brother was busy in the kitchen she came to their table. "It does feel good to sit down," she admitted.

They spent awhile talking about Tom and his family. Bashalli complimented him more than she thought she should, but could not help herself. She had taken an immediate liking to Tom Swift. She kept looking at his features, listening to the sound of his voice. Staring into his eyes.

Soon, all too soon, she had to get back behind the counter.

But, she told herself, she would make it a promise to herself to get to know this young man.

She also resolved to thank Sandy.

And, she had that opportunity an hour after the boys left when Sandy waltzed into the shop. Bud had called her to report success.

"Isn't it a wonderful day, Bashi?" she asked breezily.

Bashalli crossed her arms under her breasts and tried to look stern. "Sandra Swift. I thought you promised to not try to get your bother and me together. Didn't you promise?"

Sandy could see that Bashalli wasn't actually angry, so she answered lightly, "Well, yes, but you see I had my fingers crossed. Besides, you have to admit it wasn't me."

Bashalli thought then nodded. "And if your Bud Barclay hadn't started coming practically every day and finally spilled the beans to me yesterday, I might have lived my life believing that Tom Swift just happened into my cafe and into my life." Realizing what she had just said, she reddened slightly.

Sandy seized on the statement. "So. You admit that you want to see him again. I will take your silence or even protests as a sign that I am correct. And, you're welcome!"

Becoming serious, Bashalli said, "One introduction does not a relationship make, Sandra Swift. I will admit," she lowered her voice to keep Moshan from possibly overhearing her, "that Tom is a very nice looking boy. Your Bud is not difficult to look at as well. But, I have so many things to overcome before I can even allow myself to get interested."

Sandy looked like she was about to protest, but Bashalli continued, "Please think how devastating it would be to you if you were introduced to, well, Bud one day, became interested and excited about the prospects of seeing him, and then after weeks of anticipation, perhaps even moments of passion, you

were forcefully separated. Imagine the hurt. I have been through that once before and do not wish to go through it again.”

She told Sandy of a boy she had fallen for when she first attended Shopton High School. He was two years older and on the school football team. He had been the first boy she ever kissed. With all the overwhelming emotions of any young girl, she had fallen hopelessly for him, believing it to be true love.

Then, a misplaced note and an overheard telephone conversation later and her parents had put an end to the budding romance. They forbade her to see or to speak with the boy. They even threatened to take her out of school until he had graduated and was gone.

Hurt, desperately hurt, she had relented and given into her parents’ demands. It was a pain she still felt, even though her feelings for the boy had disappeared within weeks.

Sandy was wiping tears from her eyes by the time Bashalli finished her story.

“Oh, gee, Bashi. I’m so sorry. I didn’t think. I promise, really promise this time, that I’ll butt out. If you and Tom ever become something I’ll be very happy, but I won’t go sneaking around behind your back and try to force anything.

Before going back to work, Bashalli had given Sandy a big hug.

Moshan was peeking out through the partially open kitchen door when this happened. After Sandy left he approached his sister.

“I do not think it appropriate for you to be giving the Swift girl such close hugs and contact. You are women and it is not right that women should have contact like that!”

Bashalli smiled sweetly at her brother. “Would you find it more acceptable for me to be hugging a man? Sandy’s brother,

for example?”

Without stopping to consider what he was saying, Moshan said, “That would be much more appropriate and acceptable.”

She smiled, again. “Just remember that you said that, my dear, sweet, big brother.” With that, she walked past him and into the kitchen.

CHAPTER 4/**A Little Push**

MOSHAN PRANDIT was an intelligent man, yet it took him almost two days before the full realization of what he had said hit him. He decided that the best plan of action was to first talk the matter over with his father, and to then tell Bashalli that he absolutely forbade her from ever touching Sandy Swift's brother.

While his plan was fairly well thought out, the results were less than he had expected.

"Moshan, my son. I am a man of Pakistan. You are a man of Pakistan. To us, it is a simple matter. Women are forbidden to have contact with men until we arrange a marriage for them. After that, it is up to the husband to keep them in line. As to the matter of a woman touching another woman—"

Moshan grinned. Inwardly, he was rubbing his hands together in glee.

"And, here," Mr. Prandit continued with a sad shake of his head, "is where you must understand that we are no longer in Pakistan. The old ways are not the ways of this great nation. And, even though you, in what I believe to be a fit of foolishness and shortsightedness, refused to become a citizen, you now live here and must also abide by both the laws of this country as well as its customs."

His son opened his mouth to speak but close it, failing to find the appropriate words.

"Your mother, a woman, and your sister, now also very much a woman, will remind you that they would have been virtual slaves had our family remained in Pakistan. Even more so today given the terrible turn of events there. They will also tell you that there is such a thing as free choice here. Your mother abides by my decisions in almost everything except on how to

raise and control Bashalli." He looked at his son and softened his gaze.

"I know that you love your sister and want what is best for her. I want that even to a higher degree than I want her to be subjugated to a man. Any man including you or I. Can you understand that she is less Pakistani and more American than you or I will ever be?"

Moshan scowled. "It is not right!"

"And yet, it is the way of things here in Shopton and in New York and this country and even in all of North America. Now, because you and I are not controlled by mere emotions as women are, it is up to us to advise and to gently shepherd Bashalli toward a man who will be good for her and good to her. Should that man be from Pakistan, then we will obviously be overjoyed. Should he be otherwise, there may come the time when we have to, I believe the saying is to 'suck it up,' our feeling and to be there to support Bashalli."

Moshan had left the living room in emotional turmoil. Sitting on the back porch ten minutes later, he was even more confused when it occurred to him that there was some level of contradiction in his thoughts and his actual behaviors. Were there not several young women, American women—particularly the attractive redheaded one who came in for a skinny vanilla latte and a cheese danish every weekday—that he found himself attracted to? Especially the redhead. A truly beautiful, fair skinned woman with a figure he also admired.

Why might it be permissible for him to enjoy the sights and smells of a variety of women and not be permissible for Bashalli?

He went back inside to speak with his father about this.

In response, he received a rueful chuckle and the advice, "Welcome to the one contradiction in ideals that I absolutely have come to understand, my son. Embrace it as it will show

you a prime example of why our ways do not directly mesh with the American way of courtship. Do not allow it to bother you unduly.”

That evening at the dinner table Bashalli was pensive. She wanted to talk about her meeting with Tom but knew that there would be resistance from her father and brother. And, her mother would simply sit there saying nothing in her favor or against her. She was frustrated.

“I am taking a day off from work tomorrow, Moshan,” she informed him.

“Why?”

“Because I have several things to which I want to attend and also wish to spend the day with my friend, Sandra.”

Moshan practically growled, “You have a commitment to work in my cafe.”

“Then,” she said looking down at her plate, unable to believe she was about to say this, “consider that I have resigned from your cafe. I am over the age of eighteen and can make this decision.”

The four Prandits sat in silence for many minutes, hands in laps or on the table. No one was eating.

“I think that your brother deserves the standard American two weeks notice before you leave his employ, but I also,” her father said seeing his son smirking, “believe that Moshan needs to find a part time person so that you can have free time during the week and on the weekends.” Moshan’s smirk became a scowl, but Bashalli was now holding back a smile.

She got up from the table and kissed her father on the cheek. “Thank you for your wisdom, father,” she told him. Turning to her brother, “And thank you for understanding that I need to have some life of my own, Moshan. I withdraw my resignation and will work my regular hours for the next two weeks while

you locate a suitable assistant. I do, however, still wish to take tomorrow off.”

“Do you have any school tomorrow, dear?” Mrs. Prandit asked.

“No, Mother.”

“Then, might you be able to open the cafe and work until, possibly, nine or ten in the morning, then take the remainder of the day off?”

Bashalli knew that her mother rarely entered into these types of discussions, but also could see that she was trying to find some acceptable, medium ground.

“Yes. I can do that. Will that be okay, Moshan?”

Reluctantly, he nodded, saying nothing.

When Bashalli emerged from The Glass Cat just before ten, Sandy was waiting for her. She had borrowed Tom’s 2-seat convertible. When they climbed in, Sandy handed Bashalli a paper sack.

“It is quite light to be our lunch, Sandy.”

Sandy laughed. “Not lunch, Bashi. We’re heading to Lake Carlopa for a nice day of sailing in my little boat. I figured that you might want to change into something more, uh, nautical.”

Bashalli opened the bag and looked inside. She let out a gasp. “Oh, my! Are you certain?” Sandy nodded. “Well, I hope that nobody who knows my brother or father see me in this.” She pulled out a light blue bikini and set it in her lap. Looking down at it as the car pulled away from the curb, she muttered, “This is going to be a first.”

“I bought that last year and my mother bought me the same thing that same afternoon when she was out shopping. I’ve just kept it in the box. I thought you might want to use it. Actually,

you can have it. My gift.”

Bashalli shook her head. “I might give in to the concept of wearing this. I have wanted to have a two-piece bathing suit for many years, but I know what would happen to it and to me if I bring it home.” She made a ‘tearing in half’ motion with her hands.

Once they arrived at the lake, Bashalli headed for the changing and shower pavilion while Sandy got the little 17-foot sailboat ready. She had just hoisted the main sail when she looked under the boom and saw a shapely pair of dark legs. She poked her head under the aluminum bar and let out a little gasp.

“My god! Bashi. You’re stupendous!”

Bashalli noticeably reddened and shifted uncomfortably. “Sandy!” she hissed. “I can’t wear this. It is so—”

“So perfect on you,” Sandy finished, although that is definitely *not* what Bashalli was about to say.

Still embarrassed, Bashalli stepped into the boat and sank down onto the cushion on the starboard side. She arranged her purse and the paper bag, now containing her jeans and the blouse she had been wearing, in her lap and tried to scrunch down so that they covered more of her exposed skin.

“Sandy? This is okay with you? I mean, you have no issues being dressed in this?”

Sandy smiled and shook her head, her ponytail swinging back and forth behind her head. “Bashi. Honestly, if you were built like, oh, Amanda Mason with her huge hips and bulging tummy, then that would be absolutely wrong. You, however, have a divine figure and should show it off. And, that suit shows you off beautifully.” Seeing the look of disbelief on her friend’s face, she added, “Nothing that shouldn’t be showing is out. And, that color is perfect against your skin. I wish I could get a tan close to that, but,” she pointed at her head, “it’s that

blond thing, again.”

Sandy hopped onto the little walkway next to the boat, unhooked the forward and aft lines and pushed the boat out of its slip. With a skill garnered from ten years of sailing experience, she easily slipped past Bashalli and sat down at the tiller, pulling in on one of the ropes—called sheets—to haul the sail around and to catch the breeze. In moments they were moving away from the little marina and out into the main part of the lake.

“I have never been in a sailboat, Sandy,” Bashalli admitted. “I was worried that there would be rocking and motion that might make me feel a little upset, but this is nice.”

Sandy smiled and turned her face into the breeze letting a few wisps of her hair stream back out of her face. “Not on a day like today, Bashi. Of course, this little boat can only go so fast and isn’t very good in choppy water, so I only take her out on nice days like today.”

She looked at her friend trying to decide if she should add, *If you want a real sailing experience, you should go out with Tom some time*. But, she chickened out and said nothing about her brother.

They sailed across the lake and around the little island where a lot of local teens had already beached their boats and were dancing to a boom box someone had brought out.

“Want to stop for a dance or two?” Sandy asked.

Bashalli’s eyes went wide. “Absolutely not, Sandra Swift. I could never be seen in public dancing with a strange boy... or man for that matter.” She looked down at her body. “Especially like this!”

Here goes nothing, Sandy thought. “What if it were Tom?” she asked, trying to feign innocence.

Instead of an outright refusal—she was anticipating *that*

reaction—the Pakistani girl looked thoughtful. “Do you really believe that I should pursue your brother? Or, let him pursue me if he is so inclined?”

Sandy’s head bobbed up and down. In the past few weeks she had begun to think about how wonderful it would be to have Bashalli in her—*oops!* she thought—in Tom’s life. Bashalli was like the sister Sandy never had. A big sister she could confide in and gossip with and have fun with.

“Do you have something in your eye, Sandy?” Bashalli asked noticing the single tear that had come from Sandy’s left eye, a signal that she was feeling very emotional about the subject at hand.

“No. And, yes. I really do think you and Tom are perfect for each other. I know how miserable I would be if I didn’t have Bud, and I just bet that you would really like to have a boyfriend. Tom needs someone just like you. You, in fact. He’s brilliant, a genius in every way, and has to have someone who can be as smart as he is. Plus, he is sort of tunnel-visioned right now with his experiments and inventions and needs someone to force him to have a social life.”

Bashalli looked thoughtful. She did like Tom from the one time they had met. Plus, Sandy was right. She longed to have a boyfriend, perhaps even a bit more than she had longed to have a close girlfriend before Sandy came into her life.

She nodded at Sandy. “Okay. Let us say that I do find your brother attractive and interesting. Let us also say that I can find some way to see him without causing either my father or brother to explode or having some sort of attack. Let us also say that your brother would like to get to know me better.”

“Okay. Let’s!” Sandy said as if that settled the matter.

“No, Sandy. There is more. My own beliefs, even discounting my upbringing, is that I wish to remain... well, that is I want to not go... uh...”

Grinning, Sandy told her, “Not to worry, Bashi. Tom’s a gentleman. He won’t try to do anything you don’t want to. I know my brother and I know the Swift men. At least, Mother does and she will tell you that you’re probably going to be the one to have to make the first move, anyway!”

“I am not certain if I could bring myself to make a *move*, as you say, but let us continue this fine sailing adventure. Tonight, perhaps I can meet Tom at a little restaurant over closer to where you live. Piccolo’s? Do you know it?”

Sandy did and said she thought it was a fine idea.

“Switch places with me,” she suggested. I need to make a call. All you have to do is hold the tiller straight for a couple minutes. Okay?”

Reluctantly, Bashalli moved to the back of the boat while Sandy moved to sit on the port side. She pulled her cell phone out of her little beach bag and was soon asking to be put through to her brother.

“Yo, Tomonomo. Are you going to be somewhere on planet Earth tonight or are you somewhere in your secret land of science?”

She listened and smiled, giving Bashalli a thumbs-up sign.

“Great. You’ve got a date, then. Piccolo’s at seven. Bring a single red rose and be prepared to dine with the most beautiful girl in all of Shopton. Maybe even New York.” She hung up before he could reply. “All set.”

CHAPTER 5/**Sparks**

WHEN TOM arrived a minute after the appointed hour, it was to find his date missing. Come to think of it, he wasn't certain who he should be looking for, but there seemed to be no unattached girls or women around. He decided to wait in the entry rather than go to the table.

"Can I get you a drink, sir?" the hostess asked. "We can have your bar tab added right to your bill."

Tom shook his head. "It's too late for a cola and I'm not old enough for much else. Thanks, though."

He waited another ten minutes and was about to call his sister to see if this had all been some sort of joke, when Bashalli arrived. At first, Tom thought that she must be there to meet with someone else. After all, they had only met the one time. But, with a nervous smile on her face, she came over to Tom and held out her right hand.

"Oh, gosh. Hi, Miss Prandit," Tom stammered, taking her hand and giving it a brief shake.

"Hello, Thomas. It is good to see you. Again, that is. I—" she appeared to lose her train of thought, but she actually was trying to get over how good he looked. "Well, my friend and your sister has been carefully making certain that you and I meet and now have a dinner date."

Something in what she said made Tom think that this was not going to be a successful date. But, he smiled and replied, "Sandy can be a bit of a force. Don't let that get in the way of our having a nice evening. Okay?"

"I promise. Please call me by my first name. Bashalli. And, at least for now I will call you Thomas."

He grinned at her and nodded. "Miss?" Tom said turning to the hostess. "We're both here. Whenever you have a table ready."

"Right now, sir," she said, leading them through the crowd of other diners and to a nice table next to a large arrangement of flowers. "And this," the woman said pulling a narrow and long box out from behind the arrangement, "is for you." She handed it to Tom.

After seating Bashalli, he took his chair across the table from her and looked at the box. A small envelope on top simply said, "T.S." He opened it and let out a laugh.

"Sandy was certain I'd forget to bring you a rose," he said, "so she arranged for this one to be waiting." He handed the box to his dining companion.

"Why, thank you, Thomas," she told him as she opened the box to find one perfect red rose. "It is amazing. I have never told Sandra of my love for red roses, and yet she knew. I have to say that I am getting more and more impressed with your family with each passing day. Do you all read minds?"

They had a wonderful dinner and by dessert time were regaling each other with family stories and humorous memories.

As they sat sharing a caramel rum bread pudding, Tom looked at Bashalli and said, "I have the funny feeling that we've known each other for a long time."

Bashalli blushed. "I, too, have the sensation of knowing you for much longer than we have. Isn't it funny?"

He nodded.

When the last bite had disappeared, she looked at her watch and announced, somewhat sadly, that she needed to get to her parents' home. "It isn't actually a curfew," she explained, "it is just that... well, to tell you the truth, my parents do not know

that I am on a date tonight. Even after living in this country for nine or more years, they find it difficult to understand that I want to date.”

Tom, who had been briefed by Sandy as he was preparing for the date, smiled at her. “Not to worry, Bashalli. I don’t want you to get in trouble over just a dinner. I would very much like to see you again. Do you think it would be okay for you to come to Enterprises some day soon? I’d love to show you what I’m working on.”

“Your giant plane?”

“Yes. And other things as well. I think you might like them, and I’d be proud to give you the full tour.”

As they rose to leave, she turned to him and smiled. “I believe that I would like that. Very much!”

When she got home, her family was waiting for her, the television turned down.

“Where have you been?” Moshan demanded.

“I have been to a nice dinner. I had a pleasant day out on the lake with Sandra and it was topped off with a wonderful fish dinner.” She looked at her mother, hoping for support, but found no eye contact. Inwardly, she took a deep breath and prepared herself.

Sitting down next to her mother, Bashalli looked sweetly at her father. “And, did you three have a pleasant dinner as well?”

Mr. Prandit was unsure of how to proceed. He didn’t have the automatic distrust of his daughter that his son did, but she had become a very changed young woman the past several weeks. Starting with her having met Sandy Swift.

In a soft voice, Mrs. Prandit told her, “We had chicken jalfrezi, vegetable shawarma and naan. Was your dinner at the Swift home?”

“No. We went out to dinner. We had a bread pudding with a caramel sauce as well. Very tasty, for non-Pakistani food.”

Mr. Prandit looked directly at his daughter. “With whom did you dine?”

Bashalli felt herself want to begin shaking, but she fought it off and tried to breathe regular, measured breaths. “Father. I told you I was with Sandra Swift today. May I ask why you are so bothered?”

“Because Moshan saw your friend, Miss Swift, about an hour ago driving through downtown. Now, will you answer me? I am your father. With whom did you dine?”

Bashalli sat up straight. She had a sudden rush of adrenaline that gave her an inner strength. “I had dinner tonight with Sandra’s brother, Tom Swift. The young inventor. He and Sandra’s boyfriend came to the cafe a few weeks ago and I met him then.”

She looked at her mother who was staring at her, eyes wide with surprise and, Bashalli noted with satisfaction, a little bit of pride.

“Ask Moshan. And, do not lie, my brother. He told me he would rather that I be seen with Tom Swift than with Sandra Swift. I gave her a friendly hug one day and he told me that hugging her was wrong but that he would approve of my hugging Tom.”

She sat back, having leaned forward while delivering her admission.

Moshan was sitting very straight and still. He remembered the incident and how his own words had finally sunken in. Now, his young sister was using those words against him. But, rather than finding himself angry at the situation, he felt a small happiness he did not expect.

“She is correct, Father,” he admitted. “It was a moment of

stupidity on my part. I still feel that it is wrong for two women to be in contact in public and told her that contact with the brother would be appropriate.”

Mr. Prandit was stunned. The last thing he had anticipated was that his son would come to the aid of Bashalli in this manner.

Then, on thinking about the situation, he broke out into a smile. “Well, it is about time that my children began acting like brother and sister rather than working against each other. I hope your mother can find it in her heart to be as proud of you two as I am.” He winked at his wife who was the only one to catch the gesture.

“Still,” Moshan told his sister, “I do not thoroughly approve of you seeing a non-Pakistani. But,” he could see Bashalli getting ready to take him to task for that statement, so he hastily added, “if this is viewed in a rational manner, then I must say that I and Father and Mother want a good man for you. Someone who can take care of you and give you what you need and want. Someone with a good job and an education. A nice, older man.”

Oh-oh, Bashalli thought. Here it comes.

“So, my daughter, how old is this Thomas Swift?”

When is a lie not a lie? she asked herself before answering him. “In truth, Father, I have not asked him his age. But, he is a most accomplished inventor and designer. In fact, he has asked me to come to his Swift Enterprises with Sandra some day soon to see his latest invention, a giant aircraft capable of carrying many people on three separate levels. I understand it is so large that it contains a helicopter inside.”

Seeing the looks of satisfied contemplation on the other three’s faces, she concluded her thought. *It isn’t a lie when it is technically the truth and is quickly put to one side.*

A half hour later she was in her room and on her cell phone.

“Sandra,” she said in a low voice. “I may have gotten away with tonight’s date with Tom, but I have a problem.” She outlined the age issue and her careful response. “They were most impressed by his accomplishments and probably believe that he must be my senior my five or even ten years. What can I do?”

They brainstormed the situation for a few minutes until Sandy heard a knock on her door. “Hang on a minute, Bashi,” she requested. “Come on in.”

Bashalli could hear the voices of both Sandy and Tom. “So, how did the date go?”

“I’ve got to thank you, San,” Bashalli heard Tom reply. “I had about the best time of my life. She’s not only beautiful, and I can’t think of a single reason someone like that would go out with me, but she is also smart and funny. I like her.”

Bashalli could feel the big grin on her face as she overheard Tom’s words.

“Anyway, just wanted to say thanks! ‘Night.”

Sandy picked up the phone. “Did you hear any of that?” she asked.

“I did. I hope I can find the words to tell him how wonderful tonight was for me as well. Perhaps I am worrying unnecessarily about Tom’s age. I hope that my family can see him for the great young man his is and the even greater man I believe he will become.”

Letting out a little giggle, Sandy told her, “With the right woman behind him, hint, hint, I’m certain you’re right!”

CHAPTER 6/**“I Really Care For Him”**

THREE DAYS later, Tom received a call from Bashalli at his desk in his underground hangar office.

“Is it possible to take you up on your offer of a tour, Thomas?”

“I’d love to, Bashalli. When can you come?”

“Well, is tomorrow too soon?” she inquired.

“Absolutely not. And, I’ve been thinking about the whole culture thing. Would it help or hurt to ask your folks and brother to come along? I mean, I’d like the chance to show them that I’m not some callous kid out to steal their daughter. What do you think?”

She told him it was exactly what she was going to ask about. “The only issue right now is age. Although I believe they can resign themselves to the fact that I may be dating a non-Pakistani, there is still a whole other thing they have about young women marrying older men.”

When she heard Tom take in a sharp breath, she added, “It isn’t that I’m contemplating marriage. But, Pakistanis aren’t so much into dating and courting as they are into quick introductions followed by a marriage ceremony that same day followed by the exchange of money and livestock. I’m fairly certain that they will be happy of the whole dating thing as it will give them hope of still finding some vile, smelly Pakistani man for me.” She laughed. So did Tom.

It was arranged that the Prandits would come to Enterprises after the closing of The Glass Cat so that Moshan could accompany them.

Tom put in a call to Chow. “Hey, Chow. I’ve got a family

coming to visit Enterprises tomorrow just before dinner time. Is there any way I could talk you into doing a nice meal for, oh it will probably be seven of us? Four Prandits, and one each Bud, Sandy and Tom.”

“Wa’al sure, Tom. Say. That name sounds kinda foreign. Indian, maybe?”

“Pakistani, actually, Chow. They’ve been in Shopton for about ten years. I’m pretty sure they eat American food. I know that Bashalli has mentioned they eat a lot of chicken and lamb, but I don’t think she mentioned any pork or beef. What can you do with the first ones?”

Chow said he’d do a little research and get back to Tom. “Jest let me know the final head count before lunch time tomorrow, okay? Gimme time ta get supplies in.”

“I’ll do that, Chow. Thanks!”

When he called Bud to ask about his availability, Bud replied, “Safety in numbers, huh? Actually, Sandy had talked me into taking her to some place called Pinocchio’s or something like that. Says it has a romantic atmosphere. But, I’m sure that she’ll come along as long as Bashalli is there.”

Tom called Chow back but got his message recorder.

“Ya’ve reached the ol’ Chow hound. There’ll be a beepin’ or some such noise when I’m finished, an’ you git to leave me a message then. If’n this is a call from one o’ them telemarketeers folks, just hang up now, I won’t be callin’ your sort back. Here comes that beep... BEEEEEEP!”

With a chuckle at Chow’s latest outgoing message—he changed it about every week—he said, “Oldtimer? It’s Tom. It’s going to be the full seven of us tomorrow. They should be here at about six and I can only keep them interested for about an hour. Hope seven works for you. We’ll eat in the Executive Dining Room. Thanks!”

At five the following afternoon, Mr. Prandit looked at his wife and she finished dressing. “You know that I have reservations about this. You know that Moshan is even more against Bashalli being so, so Americanized—”

“But, she is an American. You and Moshan may never understand it, but she grew up here. She wasn’t exposed to much of anything in Pakistan. She had her art and I had her and we stayed at home while you worked and Moshan played his sports. She did not come truly alive until we reached Shopton.”

“But, she is Pakistani,” he argued.

“No. You are Pakistani. Moshan is Pakistani. I am trapped somewhere between, but Bashi is not Pakistani. Just as if she had been adopted by an American couple right after birth and never saw Pakistan, she is not Pakistani. The outer wrapping may be brown and Asian, but the insides, especially the heart and the mind, are American.”

He shook his head. His wife had so quickly taken to the way of life in their new country. She seemed to be naturally an outgoing person when she met new people. It was only in their home that she allowed him to believe she was subservient. And, yes. He knew that she allowed him to think this was so because it made him happy.

“Will I find any solace in continuing this discussion?” he asked.

Slipping on a bracelet he had given her on their first anniversary in America, she shook her head. “I love you, my husband, and will do almost anything for you, but no. You will only make yourself miserable if you keep at this.”

“Hmmm,” he muttered before leaving the room.

Bashalli was startled at the knock on her door. “One minute,” she called out, hurriedly buttoning her blouse. “Come in. Oh, hello, Father.”

“Hello, my daughter. I have come to tell you that your mother is intending to clip me about the ears if I should transgress this evening and make a fuss about your Mr. Swift. So, I give you my promise that I will behave. I only ask that you prepare me so that nothing comes as a surprise.” He sat down on her bed and patted beside him.

As she had so many times as a young girl, she climbed up next to him and leaned against him. It was something she had missed the past two years as age and ideals had come between them.

“Father. There are so many things that you might find difficult. For one, Thomas is not Pakistani.”

Her father snorted beside her. “This is a surprise?”

“No, but there is more. I am certain, though we have not had any opportunity to discuss such things, that his religious beliefs are not the same as yours. I am not even certain if he has any religious convictions. Most assuredly, his attitude toward me and all women is different from yours.”

“It will take some time, and I may never be completely at ease, but your mother assures me that I will ‘get used to’ such differences. That is, if your relationship endures.”

Bashalli sighed. “Who knows? I only ask that you and Moshan let me give it a chance on my own. No interference. Can you do that?”

“I can stand back and observe. Your mother, however, is a busy body and may not be able to contain her zeal. If you see her gloating at me, please take her aside and ask her to not rub things in.”

They both laughed. He placed an arm around her shoulders and gave her a little hug. It was not a gesture he had ever made before. It felt as alien as it felt good. She leaned up and kissed his cheek.

“Now, the big one, Father. I have discovered that Thomas is not many years my senior. In fact, he is not my senior. We are almost fifteen months different in age, my being older than him.” She braced herself for what might come.

Instead of anger or even a question, he leaned over and kissed her on top of her head. “I saw a father do that to his young daughter in a movie the other evening. She seemed to appreciate it. I did not understand his reason then, but I do now.”

“Thank you, Father. I *really* do like Thomas. We have only known each other for a brief time, but we both feel as if it has been for much longer. I promise you that there will be no inappropriate behavior. Well,” she hesitated, not wanting to lie to him, “we might kiss and hold hands, even in public. Some day in the future. We are nowhere near that point now.”

“And, around him would you wear that blue and exceptionally small bathing costume you wore on the lake that day with his sister, Sandra?”

She felt the blood rush out of her face and her hands suddenly became icy. Her heart began to race as she fought the impulse to jump up and run.

He hugged her again and leaned close to her ear. Softly, he told her, “The son of one of my employees was on the island in the lake and told his father about the, and I may have this wrong, but there was evidently an ‘amazing dark-skinned girl in a skimpy blue number on a boat with Sandy Swift.’ I believe that is what he told his father. I would assume he meant you in a very small swimsuit.”

Bashalli sat up and turned to her father. Almost unable to meet his eyes, she said, “That was me. Sandra loaned me one of her suits since I had nothing appropriate for sailing. I was embarrassed by how much it showed, but I am not ashamed for having worn it.”

“Just do not allow your brother to see you in such a thing. Or, allow your mother to know that I have not been harsh and scolded you for such a transgression of Pakistani conduct. Fortunately for you, this is not Pakistan.”

Bashalli hugged her father for more than a minute before allowing him to rise and leave the room.

They swung by The Glass Cat fifteen minutes later and picked up Moshan. He had a box with him. One of those used to package larger orders of his pastries.

Tom met them at the gate and introduced himself as formally as he could. He finished by trying out the few words in Urdu he had managed to master.

“Sveikinimai. Sveiki atvykę Swift Enterprises. Greeting and welcome.”

Mr. Prandit beamed. It had been years since he had heard his native tongue spoken by anyone other than his family.

“Mes džiaugiamės būti čia. I just said that we are please to be here, in case you have not reached that point in your Urdu studies.”

“To tell you the truth, I had a hard enough time with just the few words I’ve already said. I only know a few others. I’m hoping that I can keep them in my head until dinner time when I intend to make a toast.”

“Then I and my wife and son look forward to hearing them.”

“I hope your daughter will like them as well,” Tom said with a slight blush.

Moshan handed Tom the box. “I made these this afternoon for you and your family. I hope you enjoy them.”

“I’m sure we will. If these are anything like the one I tasted in your cafe, then they will be delicious! Thank you.”

They toured the Administration building as well as the Propulsion Department building, specifically to show them the display of turbine-power units made by Swift Enterprises.

Before going to the underground hangar, he also showed them The Barn, an above ground, open-ended hangar inside of which many of the prototypes of larger inventions and machines developed by Tom and his father were assembled.

Currently, a small helicopter with unique blades and a tiny, one-man jet were in the final stages of assembly. These, Tom explained, would be part of the equipment packed inside of his new aircraft, "Which we'll go down and see now."

As Tom had anticipate, the hit of the tour was when the elevator doors opened on the main floor of the underground hangar and everyone could see the enormous *Sky Queen*, Tom's Flying Lab.

While Bashalli and her mother hung back near the elevator, Tom, Moshan and Mr. Prandit approached the fuselage.

Nobody said a word for several minutes. Finally, Moshan placed a large hand on Tom's shoulder. "You have designed and built this magnificent aircraft? And, it will fly with just those tiny wings?"

Tom nodded.

The hand came off of his shoulder and was offered forward. "Then I wish to shake your hand. I have never seen anything so wonderful. I hope that some day I might ride in it."

"That will definitely be arranged, sir."

They shook hands and Tom looked over in time to see both Bashalli and her mother dabbing at their eyes with tissues.

They all toured the mostly complete interior where Tom explained much of the layout and the reasons for building the giant jet. Mr. Prandit, although a bureaucrat by trade, had been

a mining student at one point. He was amazed at Tom's geology and metallurgy lab cubicles.

The final stop was the large control cockpit. Everyone was silent when Tom explained how the *Sky Queen* could rise vertically on atomic powered jet lifters and even hover in the air for long periods of time. "She will fly at supersonic speeds and can be anywhere in the world in less than ten hours. Non-stop."

"You are a most impressing young man, Tom Swift," Mr. Prandit said. "Are you certain you are not part Pakistani?" He smiled to let Tom know he was making a joke.

Chow's dinner of braised lamb shanks and pan roasted root vegetables was a real hit, with Moshan asking if there might be more. The Texas cook happily obliged with a second serving.

Before dessert, Tom stood up and raised his water glass. "I want to thank you for coming here tonight. It has been a pleasure to meet Bashalli's family and to get a chance to show you who I am." He looked around at his audience. Bud and Sandy, who had joined then just in time for dinner, were smiling and Bud gave Tom a nod and a wink.

Bashalli was beaming. The evening had gone far better than she could have hoped for. Her admiration for Tom Swift had grown as she watched how well he interacted with her father and brother, and how genteel he was with her mother.

All the Prandits were smiling now.

Tom continued, hoping that he properly remembered what he was about to say. *It would be terrible if I called their grandmothers a group of hippopotamuses by accident*, he thought as he took a breath.

"Even though your beautiful daughter Bashalli and I are just getting to know one another, I make you this promise. No matter what," and he paused to recite the phrase once more in

his mind, “Aš gerbk savo dukrą. I will always honor your daughter.”

Father, mother and brother sat nodding. Bashalli was smiling so big her mouth almost hurt. Bud mouthed, “Right on!”

The only sound that could be heard was the light sobbing of Sandy who was so happy that she couldn’t contain herself. *I made this happen*, she told herself. *I did it!*

Bashalli stood up and leaned in to whisper in Tom’s ear. “Thank you. And, do you want to know something? I think this may have just opened a whole new life for me. Oh, and I would be honored if you would call me Bash.”