



Tom Swift's — Fastest eGun In The West

By T. Edward Fox

Swift Enterprises makes a lot of things. A lot. But, the one thing they do not make and do not carry whenever they are traveling or on some adventure, are weapons. Deadly or otherwise. There have been quite a few times when these might have come in handy.

Tom Swift has had a few adventures where some sort of defensive capability would have saved precious time and kept him and others from harm. He has been able to use his brains to get out of scrapes most of the time. But his enemies are getting more determined.

So, and against the desires and demands of his father, he sets about creating something to provide defensive measures for use in extreme circumstances. Non-deadly measures.

When Tom is faced with the possible loss of people he loves, can he save the day using his new non-weapon, weapon?

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This story is dedicated to the original Tom Swift who invented an electric rifle (circa 1911). A weapon that was the theoretical genesis for what we now take for granted, the TASER—that's as in **Thomas A. Swift's Electric Rifle**. Almost as futuristic as Buck Rogers' ray pistol, the electric rifle was ahead of its time. Well, time caught up with it fairly quickly. Wonder what will be commonplace tomorrow that *our* Tom Swift is creating today? TWT. (Time Will Tell).

A SWIFT ENTERPRISES INVENTION BONUS

Fastest eGun In The West

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FOREWORD

Tom Swift is a young man for whom the words, or indeed the concept of, scientific boundaries have little meaning. He has been faced with the impossible, the improbable and the downright impractical ever since he was about eight years old.

So far, not much has stopped him or slowed him down much.

His curiosity has often led him into danger. His impetuosity has him diving headlong into things and places most of us would step away from and say, “Well... hmmm? Uh... perhaps I’ll head the other way after all.”

The only thing Tom lacks is a mechanism to extricate himself from these scrapes. Luckily he has his brain. Hasn’t let him—or us—down so far.

All good things, they say, come to an end. And, so goes Tom’s ability to use only brain and brawn to rescue someone he loves. I know his father. He absolutely hates the thought of any Swift or Swift sponsored expedition carrying weapons. It is an issue that dates back to the use of one of his inventions as a deadly weapon during World War II.

I never thought I would see the day that Tom would stand up to his father as he does in this story. But, as ‘they’ say, the son must grow to outreach and surpass the father else civilization will surely fall.

Victor Appleton II

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PART 1***We Don't Do 'Weapons!'***

TOM SWIFT was facing a turning point in his young life. Now, at the age of eighteen, he was accomplishing more than anyone in his age group; he was possibly accomplishing more than anyone within ten years of his age. Science and electronics, aerospace and deep-ocean exploration were becoming things he did without giving them much thought.

What was giving him the 'willies' today was the thought of what he needed to ask someone. Someone special.

Tom had begun seeing a beautiful girl, Bashalli Prandit, a little more than three months earlier. They had shared some adventures, some kisses, and some tears.

A few days earlier she had asked him outright where they stood.

"You've never actually asked me to be your girlfriend, Thomas," she told him with tears welling up in her eyes. "Are we boyfriend and girlfriend?"

He quickly told her that, "I've *always* felt we're boyfriend and girlfriend. Even way back when I first came into The Glass Cat and met you, I've never wanted to date anyone else, Bash."

This had mollified her and the question had been put behind him. Or, so he thought.

"Thomas Swift! You're a real dunderhead!" his sister, Sandy had admonished him that evening. "Of course, Bashi knows you're boy and girlfriend. Boys can be so, so... so obtuse sometimes!"

She had stalked out of the room to go talk with their mother. Five minutes later and somewhat cooled down, she approached him again. "What I meant to say is that Bashi is looking for something tangible that says you are hers and she is yours. You know?"

Tom was a brilliant young man, but he shook his head. "No, San. Not really. You girls are really hard to figure out. You say 'no' when you mean 'possibly,' and tell us there's nothing on your minds when you're itching to have a long discussion. What gives?"

Sandy smiled sweetly at her brother. "It's one of the perks of being in charge of a relationship, Tomonomo. One of many." She got serious. "What I mean is that some boys, like for instance your very best friend in the whole world, Bud Barclay, get us. He gave me this darling ring a couple months ago."

She held out her hand so he could see the silver band with a small ruby—her favorite gemstone—set in it.

"Now, don't get one of your looks of abject terror, Tom," she told him. "This isn't anything like an engagement ring or like that. It's just a symbol of Bud's affection for me and a way to mark me as his in case some other young lout tries to make a pass at me."

"But, isn't that sort of, well, sexist?" Tom asked.

She shook her head, her blonde ponytail swinging back and forth behind her. “Not when it is given with love and accepted as an acknowledgment of love returned.” She made a little ‘do you see?’ face at him.

With that, Tom Swift had begun to mentally sweat and worry.

Another two days went by before he got up the nerve to discuss the matter with his friend, Bud. Bud was dating Sandy, and the pair had been together for more than a full year.

“I have to tell you skipper,” Bud told him, “that when it comes to affairs of the heart, you belong in ‘Special Class.’ I mean, I really, really, *really* like Sandy and we are great together, but you and Bashalli are absolute naturals. What’s your problem?”

“Sandy tells me I should get Bash a ring or something. The problem is, I’m not certain how she might react to something I pick out for her. Even worse, you know her folks and her brother. How are they going to take it?”

Bashalli and her family had emigrated from Pakistan a little less than ten years earlier, and while she had embraced the American teenage girl way of life—and though her mother understood that she was more American than Pakistani—both her father and brother, Moshan, were staunch Pakistani traditionalists.

They had made it very clear from the beginning that while they could accept—temporarily—Bashalli dating a non-Pakistani, both hoped that a suitable Pakistani man might be found some day and a marriage arranged. Soon.

All Bud could do was to nod. He understood Tom’s dilemma.

“I say the best thing you can do is to ask the girl herself. See if she would need to wear a bandage around her ring finger to disguise it. Or, she might even tell you she would prefer to have a necklace now and a ring later.”

Tom rubbed his jaw. This would require more thought.

Bud decided to drop the subject for the time being. “What are you working on, now?”

“I’m sure you remember being stuck in the Antarctic with my earth blaster and attacked by foreign agents, right?”

“Of course!”

“Well, while everyone was successfully rescued, a thought came to me back then. We had no real defense. Nothing that could either repel the enemy or even drive them back.”

“Or, knock them out so you could capture them?” Bud asked.

Tom nodded. “I’m trying to see if there is some way to create a protective shield that could be either projected in front of a group, or even a personal version that could be worn.”

“How about your repelatrongs?”

These phenomenal devices could repel specific elements and materials, and were the driving force in Tom’s *Challenger* spaceship. The problem was, as Tom

reminded Bud, that they had to be programmed for each element and material.

“We’d never get a broad enough spectrum of coverage without causing problems.”

“Such as?”

“Well, we might set up a shield that actually kept us from being able to move through the air. Or, if we allow, say, oxygen a clear path, then anyone heaving ice at us would have that broken down and the hydrogen remaining in front of us. Any spark, and—” He made a motion with his hands like a mushroom cloud blooming up and out.

Bud knew the Swift family feeling about carrying guns—and agreed up to a point—but he had to ask, “How about a repelatron gun? Something to punch the lights out of anyone coming at you. Just program it to repel skin. Right?”

Tom shook his head. “Physics are against you, Bud. You weigh one-eighty. If you came up against someone that weighed, oh, two-twenty, then that extra forty pounds would mean they stay still and you get thrown backwards. Remember that whole thing about equal and opposite reactions?”

Bud sheepishly grinned. “Sorry, skipper. Wasn’t thinking. What’s the answer, then? Some other type of gun? Maybe one that fires a capsule full of goo that expands as it leaves the barrel and then hits the attacker hard enough to knock the stuffing out of them?”

Tom considered the suggestion. Theoretically it might be possible. After all, he had already developed an expanding foam that grew to six times its original volume when exposed to air. And heat, like that which would build up at the front of any projectile, accelerated the process.

“So,” Bud exclaimed wiping his hands together. “That’s the solution. Right?”

Tom admitted that he didn’t know. “I’ve got to talk this one over with dad,” he told his friend.

On his walk to the office he and his father shared in the large Administration building at Swift Enterprises, Tom pondered the forthcoming conversation. Usually he looked forward to bouncing ideas off his father. A great scientist and inventor with a couple decades of additional experience, he generally pointed out a few facts or possibilities and then allowed his son to work out the details.

As Tom stood in front of his desk explaining his plans, he could see his father’s face becoming red and his eyes were staring at Tom. Finally, he stood up and leaned over his desk.

“We do not, and let me repeat that, *we do not make weapons*. Offensive, defensive, nothing. No weapons! That’s final. If you can come up with a shield, fine. But, anything that fires anything at another human, or even at an animal, is absolutely not going to happen here at Enterprises!”

Tom was stunned. Instead of the support he had

expected, his father had been exceptionally angry.

He exited the office and returned to his small office and lab in the underground hangar where his giant jet, the *Sky Queen*, resided. He slumped into the easy chair that occupied one corner of the lab.

He was still there two hours later when Bud dropped by.

Seeing the dejected look on Tom's face, Bud walked over to his favorite perch, a lab stool at one end of the workbench. After a couple of uncomfortable minutes, he cleared his throat and spoke up. "Didn't go very well, then?"

"Just slightly worse," Tom replied with a sad shake of his head. "Dad really lost it. 'No weapons, period.' Not even for defensive purposes." His shoulders, which had been tense and up suddenly slumped.

Bud tilted his head forward, pretending to look over the top of non-existent glasses, "So, professor, what do you do next?"

Tom thought for a moment before replying. "Something I've never done before, Bud. *I'm going to disobey an order from my father.*"

* * * *

Whenever Tom had some spare time during the following several weeks he would come down to his underground lab, fire up his design and electronics computer programs, and try to come up with a weapon that wasn't a weapon.

He quickly decided to abandon any sort of projectile weapon, including Buds idea of the expanding goo.

One afternoon as he dozed at his workbench, a thought stuck him and he sat bolt upright.

The object wasn't to cause hurt or damage. That would be an offensive weapon. The object had to be to deliver something that incapacitated. Something that interrupted the normal workings of the human—or animal—body without having any long-lasting effects.

He searched the room with is eyes. He knew there was something right here at Enterprises that would be the start. Something that could point the way. But, what was it? Where had he seen it? And, for that matter, how long ago?

The one thing he could not do was to ask his father. That would be tantamount to admitting he was disregarding his father's wishes.

For a full two days this played on the young inventor's mind. Everywhere he went within the company he looked carefully at everything. Nothing matched what his subconscious was attempting to locate.

That is, until he made a secret visit to the place his father referred to as The Ossuarium: the place of old bones.

It was a storage room deep in the lowest floor of what was now the Propulsion Engineering building—the original Administration building for Enterprises—and a place he had spent a lot of time wandering through in his

early-teen years.

Now, little visited and smelling of must and cobwebs, it seemed to be the one place drawing Tom with the promise of providing the answer to his question.

It took almost an hour of opening various cabinets, sliding out rust-inhibited drawers, and digging through boxes of old models before he found what he was looking for.

With a quiet, “Yes!” he held it aloft.

It was the first Tom Swift’s invention, his electric rifle. A weapon that could shoot an electrical charge strong enough to blast through a wall or to kill an elephant yet could be set to eject a small and fairly long-lasting globe of electricity that could illuminate an area like a small flare.

Neither setting would be what Tom wanted, but this was absolutely the right idea. It was the start he had been searching for.

Years after that first Tom’s exploits had been novelized, another young inventor had taken the idea and built what was now standard issue for law enforcement people, the TASER.

Where the electric rifle could spew out miniature lightning bolts, the TASER relied on a pair of wires to send the shock charge out and into its target.

Tom knew he needed something in between.

He wrapped up the rifle in some old rags and returned

to his underground lab to study the piece. It took hours to clean it up enough to determine what might still be functioning, including the careful removal of the old dry cell battery that had leaked and corroded the entire battery bay.

He discovered pretty much what he expected. The battery was connected to a series of capacitors. These took a charge and let it build up until called for with the press of the trigger. At that point, the charge—probably somewhere in the neighborhood of one thousand volts, shot through an amplifying circuit that multiplied the charge by a factor of ten.

A second, larger amplifier then quadrupled that and shot the bolt of man-made lightning out of the barrel. The great length of the heavy barrel kept the bolt mostly on target. Because damage or death was the desired outcome of the rifle at its high setting, the amperage was purposely allowed to be high.

It might even have been that such fine control wasn’t even possible all that time ago. And, that, Tom realized, was going to be one major difference. He needed to just send out enough of a *ZAP!* to incapacitate an attacker for a moment.

Carefully, he disassembled the rifle and studied each and every component. As he did, his new version began taking shape in his mind.

PART 2

Friends in Need

IT TOOK Tom two days to fully understand the electric rifle. He diagrammed everything and documented his findings.

Then, with as much care as possible, he cleaned, repaired and rebuilt the rifle before returning it to its 'hiding' place in the old storage room.

Tom spent several days designing some of the more generic circuitry he felt would be needed for a new weapon. Then, a thought hit him.

What would it actually take to just incapacitate a man as opposed to some other attacker? For instance, a charging elephant or a lion or an enraged moose? This was going to require additional study. He spent almost an entire week at the Shopton Library studying as much reference material as he could find regarding both the anatomy and the physiology of more than a dozen species.

In the end, he discovered that most living animals—excluding reptiles—had brains that operated within a narrow electrical band. Interrupt those signals going from muscle to brain and back again, and you could drop almost anything in a second. And, the difference between interrupting these signals as opposed to disrupting and confusing them was slight.

Tom realized, though, that he must do only the latter and not the former if his weapon was to be truly non-

lethal.

The problem arose with a one-zap-fits-all approach of a standard TASER. Where it could drop a large, adrenaline-filled man, that same charge could interrupt the breathing of a smaller, weaker person. It could even cause heart arrhythmia and kill.

"I've got to make this as foolproof as possible of else Dad will skin me alive when he finds out I'm building this gun," Tom muttered to himself one afternoon.

In the end, he determined that the person holding the gun would need to make a snap judgment call. Three settings should be enough. One for small humans and most animals under two hundred pounds. A second setting for large people and the third for large animals and reptiles.

His circuitry designs had to be constantly adjusted to accommodate new features that came to mind. Once he believed he understood exactly what sort of components might be necessary inside the gun, then came the problem of how to house those 'guts.' It seemed obvious to Tom that such a gun needed to be fairly small. Anything that required more than point-and-shoot ability would ultimately prove to be more of a hindrance than a help.

He recalled how heavy the electric rifle was and how ungainly it felt in his hands.

So, a handgun it would be.

He returned to his lab one night after a dinner date with his girlfriend, Bashalli, to give the first version of his

completed circuitry a test.

After mounting the emitter in a vise on the test bench inside of the sealable test chamber and setting up a target five feet away, he moved to the control board he had hastily put together. A press of one button activated the circuits and let the high capacity capacitors charge. It took, he noted, just under two seconds.

Here goes, he said to himself, pressing the ‘fire’ button.

A dazzling flash of light temporarily blinded him so he couldn’t see what happened. When he could see a few seconds later, he spotted a scorched area on the target. With some dismay he noted that it was not directly in front of the gun’s barrel; it was more than a foot higher.

“At a range of more than fifteen feet,” he told Bud when they were talking about the test the following morning, “the charge might miss. Probably would miss.”

“So, what did it look like?” Bud asked. “I mean, did it look like a zig-zaggy lightning bolt?”

Tom shrugged. “I don’t know. It was too bright to tell. Tonight, I’m going to set up a high-speed camera with a good filter and see.”

His next test showed that Bud’s assumption was correct. The charge did, indeed, zig and zag like a lightning bolt. Tom knew that would not do.

Two days later he had the solution.

“If I generate a magnetic field around the discharging energy, it should keep it contained. The issue is how far I

can extend that field.”

“I’ve got every faith in you, skipper,” Bud told him. “If I were you, I’d figure a way to glue the two together so the lightning sort of pulls the containment field along. As long as the power is on, it should all stay together. Or, is that just my athlete’s stupidity coming through?”

Tom’s mouth was agape. “Bud! That’s it! I can generate a magnetic field that will be in complete sympathy with the electrical field of the gun. I’ll have to make two semi-circular fields and let them adhere north to south and south to north, but the total magnetic field can be set so that it sticks to the discharge using that same magnetic attraction. Bud, you’re not a stupid athlete. You’re a genius!”

The next evening both Tom and Bud went back to Enterprises and tested the naked gun circuitry.

This time, the light was greatly subdued by the magnetic field. What was noticeable was the ZEERACKKK! noise the gun made when it discharged.

“Tomorrow night, Bud, we take the girls out on a well-deserved date and I’ll pay for everything. I wouldn’t have done it without you.”

But, as the saying goes, the best laid plans, etc. Tom’s father requested the young inventor to put off his date by an evening. “I really need to have you in Washington D.C, to cover for me at a meeting with a Senate committee. I’ve got something with a slightly higher priority out at the Citadel. Sorry, Son.”

When Tom broke the news to Bud, the young flyer told him, "Then, I'll just be a lucky man and get to take two beautiful girls out."

Tom agreed that it would be best to not disappoint the girls, especially since Bud's date was Tom's own sister, Sandy, who could make his life a misery.

Tom left for his Governmental meeting before lunch. It turned out to be a boring and mostly useless appearance as the committee chairman had only asked him two questions, both of which might have been asked in a simple email or phone call.

When he arrived back at his house late that evening, he was startled to see several cars parked in front of the Swift home.

Inside were Harlan Ames and Phil Radnor, both of Enterprises' Security department, two policemen and someone he immediately knew was a federal agent of some sort.

"What's going on? Where's Sandy?"

Tom could see his mother sitting to one side, a handkerchief clutched in her hands, and the telltale streaks of earlier tears on her cheeks.

"Sit down, Tom," his father told him. "It's bad news. Sandy, Bud and Bashalli have been kidnapped."

"Kidnapped!" Tom exclaimed jumping back up from the seat he had just taken.

"Sit," Mr. Swift repeated. "Agent Daily here is from the

FBI. He is fairly certain that you were the intended target and that the others were simply taken when you were missing."

Agent Daily told Tom about a gang of criminals from the West Coast that had been perpetrating such kidnappings of little known industrial people over the past several months.

"You won't have heard much as we have been keeping things pretty quiet. You appear to have been their first major target. Everyone else was from companies that are quite small. Ransoms were fairly small as well. There have been five and they've been slowly heading this way."

"Did... did everyone get rescued?" Tom asked practically choking on the emotions he was feeling.

Agent Daily shook his head and said nothing for a moment. Then, he looked straight into Tom's eyes and told him, "Two ransoms were paid. The kidnappers killed both of their victims and escaped with the money. We've tried two rescue missions. One was a success except that the kidnappers had already escaped. One was not a success."

"And, the fifth one?" Harlan asked.

"We tried a new tactic. Ignoring them. Their calls came in and we just let them talk while we said nothing. Almost got a good trace once, but they evidently moved the victim right after that. In the end, we found their hideout and rushed in. The victim survived, but they had shot her in the chest."

Tom was in an ice-cold panic now. The girl he loved was in trouble and he was helpless to do anything. He looked at his father and then at Harlan Ames. "Can't we do something?" he wailed.

"The first thing we must do is wait until they call with their ransom demands. We intend to demand that they prove they will not harm anyone if we pay."

It was a miserable three hours of waiting until the call came in. Daily and his team had installed a second receiver and a special piece of equipment to record and start the trace of the call. He counted down with his fingers, and both he and Mr. Swift lifted their receivers simultaneously.

"What do you want?" Mr. Swift demanded. "Where is my daughter and her friends? Why have you done this?" His voice went up and got louder as he said each word.

Daily made a 'calm down' motion with his hand.

"We didn't want these three. We wanted your son, Tom Swift," a disguised voice stated on the line. "We want a swap. These three for your son plus one million dollars!"

Taking a calming breath, Mr. Swift said, "How do I now you actually have them? And, assuming that you do, what assurance will you give me that they are alright?"

"This call is taking too long. We'll call later with our demands!" and with that, the line went dead.

"Far too little time to get any sort of trace," Phil Radnor said softly. Everyone knew he was correct.

Mrs. Swift went to the kitchen and made a large pot of coffee. When she returned to the living room it was obvious that she had also washed her face.

They sat around for another hour before the second call came through.

"Listen and do not ask questions!" the caller demanded. "The price is now two million dollars. The hell with your son. Now that we know one of these is your daughter, we know you will pay our price. We will call at noon with delivery information." And, the line went dead.

"I will go to the bank first thing," Mr. Swift stated.

"No. You will *not* do that. In the two cases where the ransom was paid, the victims were not recovered... intact."

While the agent and Harlan stayed awake, and the police departed, everyone else drowsed well into the morning.

Tom got up from his position in an easy chair in his father's den at around six, stretched and went upstairs to shower. He knew that it would be futile to remain at the house, He had to do something, and work would occupy that part of his brain that wanted to panic and run around, screaming.

With a promise from his father that he would be contacted as soon as they heard anything, Tom drove off to Enterprises.

He entered his lab and glanced at the stool on which Bud generally perched. He felt a searing-hot tear cascade

down his cheek. Before things could get out of hand, he plunged back into the electric gun—what he had been thinking of as the ‘eGun’ for the past couple of days—started the work of getting his magnetic containment field generators built.

They turned out to be easier than he initially thought. And, though they required an enormous amount of power, the circuitry was fairly compact and could be powered from the same Solar Battery that would power the eGun’s shock charge.

By six that evening he had cobbled together a working prototype of the generators and was ready to test them when it hit him.

He hadn’t heard from his parents!

That meant that the kidnappers hadn’t contacted them. He didn’t want to think what that might mean.

He dialed his home number.

“Why haven’t you called earlier?” demanded the voice of his father.

“It’s me, Dad. Tom. I hadn’t heard from you and got busy on the... uh... on an experiment. They haven’t called?”

His father sighed. He could hear the stress the older man was under as he told Tom, “We haven’t heard a thing. However, Agent Daily tells us that this is standard for this gang. We will probably hear tomorrow or the next day. They seem to like causing as much emotional distress as possible.”

After that call, Tom phoned Hank Sterling and Arv Hanson, the chief pattern maker and model maker for Enterprises. When they arrived he showed them the prototype of his eGun.

“I want to get this built pronto. It may need an all-nighter from you.” He explained the plight of Bud, Bashalli and Sandy. They immediately agreed to put everything else aside and to concentrate on Tom’s project.

“If we can set up here and work right along with you,” Hank offered, “then we might be able to come up with something by tomorrow.”

Tom was grateful and told them so.

While Tom sought to downsize his circuitry, Hank and Arv worked on some initial case designs. Each man took a short nap between midnight and five a.m. but by the time ten rolled around they had the completed gun design ready.

Tom stood back looking at the computer screen where Hank had posted the finished look. It was futuristic, sleek and almost toy-like. About twelve inches long, it was angular in every way except for the fairly standard-looking handgrip.

Pointing at the two angular bulges running along above and below the barrel, he questioned their need to be so large and long.

“Well,” Arv told him, “your magnetic field emitters take up the front inch and a quarter. We figure that it might be better to have a housing area for the actual circuits behind

that rather than trying to cram it all into the body and handle. Besides, you've got to have room for the battery."

Tom favored the two men with a slightly ashamed grin. "I hadn't thought about that," he admitted. "Thanks for having my back on this."

Hank and Arv next sent various case component pieces to their 3-dimensional printers, then left Tom to complete building the final miniature circuitry.

Four hours later they came back with the complete case.

Tom was just finishing his tests on the settings controls. A 3-position thumb switch would do the trick.

Fifteen minutes later they had assembled the eGun. Tom was about to insert the Solar Battery when his phone rang.

"Tom," his father told him, "You need to come up to my office right now. We've transferred the home line to here at Enterprises, and just received a brief call to stand by for the ransom details in ten minutes."

Tom hastened out of the office and upstairs to the Administration building where he and his father shared a spacious office.

Agent Daily was there looking particularly haggard. Harlan Ames was standing near one corner with Tom's father and they were speaking in whispered tones.

Moments later the phone rang. Agent Daily pressed the speakerphone button and the call was connected.

"We're here," his father said.

"We? What do you mean by 'we'?" When the agent shook his head cutting Tom's father off from explaining anything, the caller continued. "Do you have the money? Right now it is two million. If you hesitate it will be three million the next time we call."

Taking a deep breath, and obviously repeating what he had been told to say, Mr. Swift said, "We are not paying the ransom. The FBI has ordered me to refuse to deal with you. You haven't honored previous payments and have killed your victims. As much as it destroys me to say, we cannot trust you, so there will be no payment!"

An evil chuckle came through the speaker. "*Then, we have no choice but to kill your daughter and her friends!*"

PART 3**Finally, Seeing The Need**

TOM GLANCED at his father in dismay as the line went dead. He looked at Harlan and then at the FBI agent. None of them had an encouraging expression.

“We have to do something!” he wailed. “And, now! What are you all waiting around for?”

“Tom,” Ames began, “we have no idea where they are. They never remain on the line long enough to get a trace the phone company can be certain of. Where would we start?” He looked very unhappy. He felt that he was personally letting Tom down and it made him miserable.

“Well, I’m not waiting around. Bash, Sandy and Bud are in danger. I’ve got to do something!”

With that, Tom dashed from the room. He had an idea and wanted to check it out immediately, so he headed for the radio and communications building.

“Set up a comms link with the outpost,” he ordered the duty radioman. It took just a few seconds before Tom was connected to the Swift’s outpost in space, some 22,300 miles above the equator.

“Hello, Tom,” the voice of Ken Horton, station commander, welcomed him.

“Ken. We have a big problem down here.” He quickly outlined the kidnapping and ransom demands.

“So, I need you and your people to check to see if any of their calls were routed up through the station. The phone

company says they can’t get enough info out of their computers and switches down here, but I thought maybe you could.”

Horton promised to get back to Tom as quickly as possible. That call came in just ten minutes later.

“We did a computer scan of all calls going through our equipment and matched that against your home phone. We got two hits!”

“Was there enough to get a position? And address?”

“Sort of. The calls originated in a single cell phone. Unregistered, of course. All we can tell is an approximate GPS location based on where it most probably was between several difference cell towers.

He gave Tom the raw coordinates.

“Thanks, Ken. If you get anything else, let me know. Also, if there are any other calls see if you can get a better location while the call is happening.”

He raced back to his underground office and lab where he called up a map of New York. Checking the coordinates against the map he soon found what he was looking for.

“It’s the old Thessaly Airport!” The airport had been abandoned years earlier when Shopton built a new regional airport.

Tom made a quick call to one of the hangars and ordered a fast, small jet readied.

As he was leaving the office he all but collided with the large bulk of Chow Winkler, former ranch cook and now personal chef to Tom, his father and most of the senior Enterprises staff.

“Whar’s the fire?” the roly-poly man asked as he straightened several dishes that had been knocked askew on the food cart he had been pushing.

Tom told him.

“Well, then. I’m comin’ with ya. Grub can wait! Never can tell when you’ll need a second set o’ eyes or a dab hand at fightin’!”

They left the room, but Tom returned a few seconds later. Grabbing up the new eGun and its battery, he hurried after the cook.

They hopped into a small electric car and drove quickly to the hangar.

In minutes, the jet was airborne. Ten minutes later, Tom was bringing it down onto the somewhat dilapidated runway at Thessaly.

Quickly taxiing the jet over behind a partly fallen in hangar building, Tom jumped from the cockpit, yelling back at Chow, “Stay put, Chow! Radio for help!”

With that, he darted around the side of the building, out of sight.

He stopped in a crouch next to the structure and pulled his eGun from his belt. It felt strange to be handling a weapon. It was even stranger to think that it hadn’t been tested enough to know if it would be of any use. Perhaps, he thought, just the sight of it will be enough.

He slipped the battery into the butt of the handle and felt it click into place.

Tom inched forward, his eyes darting back and forth trying to find anyone who might be lying in ambush.

Rounding a group of cargo containers, most rusted or damaged, he spied the old terminal building. Though it was too dark inside to see anyone he believed he could see a couple shadows as someone moved around in there.

He brought the eGun closer to his face and keyed in the four-digit code that unlocked the firing circuits. He could hear the four capacitors charging up. Three seconds later, four tiny green LEDs lit up showing him that the first four ‘shots’ were ready. They would remain active for five minutes. After that, the gun would shut off and the charges dissipated.

Holding the gun at the ready, Tom stepped out from behind his current place of concealment. Quickly, he ran forward, dodging around several abandoned vehicles, until he was standing behind a large steel shipping container.

He rechecked the gun. It was still showing the quad of green lights. Peeking around the front end of the steel box, he saw one of the kidnappers step out of the front doors.

Without thinking things through, Tom let out a yell and charged around the container, running full tilt toward the terminal. Two seconds later he lay on the ground, a bullet having torn through his right thigh.

The man ran back inside, and one of the windows was broken out allowing someone inside to shoot several more rounds toward Tom.

As quickly as he could, Tom pulled himself back to the container and inside. He moved back into the box about half way until he encountered a pile of discarded wood

and tarps. The pain in his leg made him want to pant and whimper, but he strove to breath quietly enough to try to hear if anyone was approaching.

Nobody.

He took a deep breath, then something caught his eye. His eGun was sitting on the ground just outside of the container. He didn't have the energy to try to reach it.

I just hope that they don't come out here and get the gun, he thought. What am I saying? I hope Chow got that call for help off.

Tom pulled out his handkerchief and pressed it as forcefully as he could manage against the bullet wound. He then reached around to the back of his leg and felt. There was no exit wound. And, that was good and bad.

If the bullet had gone through and through, chances were it would have done less damage than a bullet that flattened out enough to tear up muscle but not go back out.

As he lay there holding onto the wound in his leg, Tom could hear several voices in the direction of the terminal yelling something he could not make out. Then, three more shots sounded out, the slugs thumping into the side of the steel shipping container he was hiding in. It was like being trapped inside of a ringing bell. His ears hurt. The door was wrenched open.

Tom made a desperate dive for his eGun, but it was snatched up from the ground before he could get to it. His leg sent a searing message to his brain and his vision became a jumble of swarming lights.

He braced himself for either the shock of his own gun,

or...

“What in tarnation happened to ya, youngin’?” the voice of Chow asked him. “You take a bullet? Lemme get in there and fix ya up with one o’ them tur-nee-cates.”

Tom felt the large man's hands pulling his belt off and fastening it above the bullet hole. Moment later the pain of the belt tightening almost made him pass out.

“That'll hold ya fer a few. I'm goin' after them galloots!” Chow declared and he rushed from the storage box.

Tom tried to get out words to stop the older cook, but failed. He felt useless in the storage container. With a determination fueled by stubbornness rather than rational thought, he began to drag himself forward, toward the doors.

He reached them in time to see Chow dodging from an old luggage tractor to an overturned trailer in an attempt to reach the abandoned terminal. Several times gunshots rang out sending puffs of old paint and rust flying from one or another vehicle.

With horror, Tom heard Chow call out, “Oh, gawd! Help me. I've been hit. I've been hit. Ohhhh...”

Tom's heart sank. He looked up to Chow the way he might admire and respect a second father. And now—

He watched the front doors of the terminal open and a gun barrel extend outside. When nothing happened for minute, the gun came out farther, followed by an arm and then a cautions head. The man looked back inside and said something. Seconds later, three kidnappers left the building and started to slowly walk to where Chow was last seen.

When they reached a point about twenty feet from the baggage tractor, one called out, “I can see your leg moving. Come out of there with both hands where we can see them. I won’t shoot unless you refuse to come out. Do it!”

Tom watched as Chow slowly rose to his feet. There was a red splotch on his left side from armpit to belt. The westerner raised his right hand about half way while his left hung at his side. As he turned to face the kidnappers, Tom believed he could see the eGun tucked into the back of Chow’s belt.

One of the men put his own gun in his belt and walked toward Chow.

Light lightning, Chow’s left hand reached behind him, pulling out the eGun. There were three ZEEERACKKK! discharges in rapid succession. The closest man crumpled first followed by the other two. None of them had a chance to react to Chow’s quick draw skills.

Five seconds later Bud, Sandy and Bashalli came rushing out of the terminal. Chow pointed the barrel of the gun toward the container where Tom lay.

“Git over there an’ see if Tom’s okay. I’ll keep these hombre’s covered until help arrives.” They could all hear the sound of distant sirens as the three rushed to Tom.

Bud held Sandy back slightly so that Bashalli could reach Tom first. She knelt down beside him, her tears splashing down on his face.

Soon, Tom was also crying.

“I was so afraid I had lost you, Bash!” he told her. “I

couldn’t bear the thought. Dad told me to not—” He got no more out as Bashalli had firmly pressed her lips against his.

Pulling back, she told him in a soft voice, “I love you, Tom Swift. You and Chow came to rescue us when the FBI wouldn’t let you pay the ransom. We all heard that call. You risked your life to save us.”

The sirens now could be heard within a few hundred yards. Three ambulances, five police cars, a van full of FBI agents and a fire truck arrived and screeched to a halt.

Tom was placed on a gurney and his wound bound with—he was please to see—a Swift AutoCompress, a device he designed that allowed a medical professional to simply squeeze parts of the air-filled cast with the appropriate amount of pressure and it would continue applying that pressure to that specific area until deactivated. He was moved next to an ambulance.

Chow was ushered over to another ambulance, parked next to Tom’s. “My god, Chow. Are you okay?” Tom called over to the bloody man.

“Sure am. Good thing they was lousy shots. Just got a little nick on my belly bulge. Once I saw the blood I figured I’d make a little show of it all and gave it a good smear around my side. Worked, too!” He had a big smile on his face.

“When you pulled the eGun out of your belt and got off those three shots, I couldn’t even see your hands and fingers move. That was fast.”

“I may be a fat, old man, youngin’,” the cook said with a sly grin, “but I’m the fastest gunslingin’ hash slinger you’ll

ever run into.”

Tom required a 2-day stay on the hospital while Chow was stitched up and sent home. Bud, Sandy and Bashalli got thorough examinations and were pronounced to be in good shape, if not more than a little tired from their ordeal.

Bashalli spent most of the daylight hours sitting in Tom’s room keeping him company and playing word games with him. When he napped, she crawled onto the bed and snuggled up to him.

The only times she left his side were after hours and when Mr. and Mrs. Swift came to see Tom that first afternoon.

After their general inquiries about his condition, Tom could see that something was weighing heavily on his father’s mind.

“Dad. I’m sorry that I—”

“That you built the eGun? That you and Chow used it to save the lives of your sister, best friend and girlfriend? That you are a hero?” He smiled, lovingly, at his son. “Hank and Arv told me all about it.”

“But, you told me not to build the gun. Then, you told me to trust the FBI and not try to rescue them. I disobeyed your direct orders. I was so tunnel-visioned that I ran right into their gunfire.”

Mr. Swift nodded. “Yes. That’s certainly one way of looking at it.” He looked at his wife who smiled at him. “But, the other way to view this is that you were able to see beyond my myopic view about weapons. You came up with a defensive weapon. One that got an unfortunate

field test, for sure, but one that worked when it needed to. As far as the rescue goes, there are also two trains of thought.”

Tom looked puzzled.

“On one hand, the facts are that very few kidnappings are happily solved by paying the ransom. More times than not the victims are killed anyway. But—” he quickly went on, seeing the look of dismay in Tom’s eyes, “—on the other hand more and more rescue operations are seeing success. I just want you to know that I don’t see what you did—gun or rescue—as disobeying me.”

Tom was now even more puzzled. He opened his mouth, but his mother cut him off.

“What your father is trying to tell you is that we are very proud of you, Tom. We are both just starting to realize that you are a man, now, and have ideas and ideals of your own.”

“That’s right, Son. It may take some time, but I’ll come around some day.”

Tom smiled. *One moment of abject terror down, with just buying and giving that ring to Bash to go!*