

Thomasina Swift: Forever (and a bit) More

*There's a new Swift in town,
and she's kicking a__ and
taking names!*

BY

Leo L. Leo II

Cover Art by THud

Made in The United States on America

**This book is a parody of the first
of the original Thomasina Swift
stories:**

Thomasina Swift: Forever More

Also in this series:

Thomasina Swift and the PHARC Jet

Thomasina Swift and the Flying Generators of Death

Thomasina Swift and Her Space Lunch Program

*Thomasina Swift and Her Space Retrieval Service
(Exedra Headache #1)*

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Anything you may have heard about the author being “out of his ever-loving mind,” or “what was he thinking when he wrote this,” are simply the product of jealous small-minded individuals.

THE THOMASINA SWIFT STUFF

Thomasina Swift: She's a *Girl* Inventor

By Leo L. Leo

What do you do when you leave your native nation, travel a quarter of the way around the world in search of your heritage, fame and fortune, only to discover that things are worse out there?

Where some would give up and go home, Thomasina Swift is a young woman you don't want to cross. If she expects something to be one way, *it is*, or she makes it that way! She finds herself taking on the resurrection of the Swift Construction Company with the help of the only other Swift who possesses any gumption—Sandy Swift.

Together they whip things and people into shape and bring the company back from the brink of disaster and set it on a new course. And what a course it is!

These are the initial adventures of Thomasina Swift and Sandy Swift and Damon Swift and not Tom Swift, and the wonderful things they find they can do together!

Dedication

This book is dedicated to people who helped make this dream a possibility:

Very special thanks to my wife and family—they all may be women, but they are all nice. They are the ones who had to live with me throughout the process. For them, it was a real ordeal.

I give my personal thanks to Thackery Edward Fox. I contacted him with an idea, but he encouraged me to write a story of my own and gave me a tiny bit of help. A very small bit of help almost not worth mentioning here, you know?

And, thanks to Lulu for being there and for being the lady I always knew she could be.

Thomasina: The New Swift In Town

FOREWORD

The Multi-Universe holds all the probabilities of each person's life. Every decision made adds changes to their lives and to those around them, and adds more layers of probability. Kind of like an ever-expanding onion, except that each new layer makes a new onion. Something like that.

If the universe weren't theoretically infinite it would fill up with probable realities pretty quick.

Some people's presences are so dominating that their personality affects unknown numbers of realities. This can be a real bitch.

So, when five Tom Swifts find out about each other and start to interact in each other's lives, there're bound to be repercussions.

A story left on a bar at a restaurant draws the five Toms together to investigate the possibility of a sixth T. Swift, a contemporary to the timeline of Tom Swift Jr. A Tom Swift Jr.?

Tom Jr., (T.J.) the son of Tom Swift Sr., is considered to be the senior of the five Toms. He lives in Shopton, New York and was born in the nineteen fifties—he is eighteen.

TSL seems to be the closest Tom in probability. He lives in Shopton, New York and is almost twenty. He is the only Tom with an active love life and secretly smirks when the

others talk about girls.

Tom III (T-3) lives a hundred years into the future and was raised in Shopton, New Mexico. He is also eighteen and spends most of his time in space aboard his ship, *Exedra*.

Tom IV (T-4) lives in Shopton, California and in from the present day. He won't tell the others how old he is, but they all believe that he is nineteen or twenty.

Tom V (Little Tom or LT) lives in Shopton, New York, is from the present, and is the youngest at sixteen and still thinks that fighting robots and inflatable space hotels are neat!

Enjoy!

Leo L. Leo II

A NEW SWIFT COMES TO TOWN

(and a bit)

Forever More



By Leo L. Leo II

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Prologue to *Forever (and a bit) More*

The summoning light was blinking as Tom Swift Jr. let himself into the lab. It was early and he had nothing to do other than a little catching up on his reading. “Oh poop,” Tom thought to himself on seeing the light. “The reading can wait. I’m sure this summons won’t.” He set his ever-present grandé mug of hot chocolate chai tea latte aside, pressed a button on the doorframe and watched as the room sealed itself off from the rest of the world. Reaching behind a picture of his girlfriend, Phyllis, he placed his hand on a biometric sensor and a laser scanned both his thumb and forefinger.

Next, an iris scanner cranked down from the overhead and sat in front of his face, its expectant green light pulsing silently. Waiting. However, it would only wait fifteen seconds. If he didn’t scan his right eye, or if the computer didn’t match it with the seven authorized irises in its memory, poisonous gas would be released into the room and he would die three seconds later.

He shoved his head forward and centered his eye in the scanner’s padded cradle. The light flashed five times and then a light bar glided down from the top. He pulled back and took a deep breath. His hand was now poised on the door release—just in case the computer was acting up...

again. The whole affair with the bar girl, Nancy, had left a bad feeling inside him. There was a loud click and a seamless door opened from behind a workbench that slid out of the way. He smiled and let his breath out in a loud *whoosh!* The doorway radiated a blackness that swirled with dark grays, like coffee with a drop or two of milk that gets gently stirred. He stepped into it and disappeared.

Tom stepped out of the other side and into a bright spring day. He was at the end of a small parking lot from which almost stifling heat was rising causing him to immediately begin to sweat. He walked quickly to the nearby building. The only visible door was large and made with ornate wood inlays showing a scene straight out of Dante's *Inferno*. The building walls were of stone giving the structure an almost medieval look. It was a single story high and had the words 'Tom's Clubhouse' and 'No Girls Allowed!' hand printed on a piece of wood over the door. As he approached the building the door opened and a large robot gave him the once over with its red eye lenses.

"Oh, it's you, is it, Master Tom? The others are waiting for you in the meeting room. Come in before all the A/C gets out!"

"Thank you, Aristotle. It's good to see you, too." He strode past the robot and called over his shoulder, "How are Ben and Anita?"

"They are both well, Sir. But they could not

come today what with her being all fat with that baby inside her. Teens. You just can't trust them. This way please." The robot pushed past him and then lead him to the next room.

"Hey, T.J., good to see you again," said Tom 3 getting up to shake his hand. Tom 4 finished dealing a card off the bottom of his solitaire deck, reached out and shook his hand also.

"Sit. Things are hitting the fan and the two of us think we could all be in a deep kimchee. TSL and Little Tom can't be here at this time, so we're on our own, as usual." T-3 handed him a folder. "Read this, but do it fast; we'll wait." And the two other Toms stared pointedly at TJ making his squirm in discomfort. Five minutes later he put the folder down.

"Where did this come from?"

"The babe who does dishes here found it a couple of weeks ago. We've all read it and think it is just another Swift story," answered T-4. "I was here last night playing poker with friends and found it under the bar. After I read it this morning I summoned T-3 and the others. He was the only one who could come. The other two are willing for us to handle it."

"Is it for real?"

"Maybe. If so, we're okay. If not, we're probably hosed! It doesn't make sense."

"You know," said T-3, "the Swift in that story

doesn't have the technology to make a Negative Zone Portal. This could be a great wheeze on the part of your dad, Tom Sr."

"I can get into that," said Tom Jr. He thought for a moment and added, "Means we have two choices. Wait and see what happens or go looking for the jerk who left that."

"Got your back on that, so how do we find him?" asked T-4.

"We invent an NZ Snooper."

"A what? A New Zealand Snooper?"

"A *Negative Zone* Snooper; it will locate a Negative Zone portal. Then we follow it to its point of origin. The NZS can't be too hard to make. Even LT could do it if we draw up the schematics for him."

"Okay," said T-3, "Let's get on it. It's better than waiting. One of use can go ahead come up with a detector. After that what do we do? Go in with our guns blazing?"

The other Toms shook their heads no.

"I know you're both pacifist, but don't be so mamby pamby; I'm the one who's going to track that person down. I have the space ship with an NZ device built in plus I have the time and the guts to do this. Get me the coordinates of where to go, and when I find him or her, I'll come back and get you. We'll go in all peacefully but if the other guy has a different ideas, well, my ship does carry weapons."

He sat back with a determined look on his face.

“You're right, T-3, we don't know what's what, who's who or when's when, and it's no use all of us getting killed because we want to be all lovey and sweet,” was Tom IV retort.

“So, I take it we have a plan. Yes?” inquired TJ. The other two nodded. “Good! I'm hungry! T-3, can you get your surely robot, Aristotle, to whip us up some lunch? I have a hankering for a triple cheese bacon and egg burger with all the fixings, chili cheese fries and a large Physician Pepper.”

“What did you do with the real Tom Jr?” asked T-4. “He'd rather invent than eat. On top of that, you're already a little pudgy. Aristotle! Make that a single burger. Can't have the universe is ending because his arteries plug up!”

Chapter One: Secrets Told

Tommy Swift sat in her grandma's bedroom all pouty-faced and sad. It wasn't bad enough that Tommy had the *name* Tommy—which everyone *knew* was a boy's name and boys were icky!—but her grandma was ever so ill. So much so that Tommy could only stomp her feet and be angry that there was not a single thing she could do about it.

"Perhaps, Grandma," she told the withered old woman laying deep in the soft feather bed, "if I were a boy and not a stupid girl, or at least if I have to be a girl it should be with a girl's name like Clarissa or Josephine, or even Honeysuckle, why then I would wager that I could find just the right herb out in your old garden to make you all better!"

Her grandma sadly shook her head. She knew how frightfully much Tommy wanted to have a girl's name, or to at least have the proper parts and a name that told everyone she was a real boy, but it was not to be. A girl she had been born and a girl she must stay. Even the vast fortune that her grandma had received from her one-time secret, and many would say 'shameful,' paramour—the man who had *interfered* with her one evening during that frightful skirmish in Korea and had left her with a headache from the gin with which he plied her, and a baby inside her tummy—was not enough to help her daring grand-daughter.

"Never fear, Tommy. As soon as I have departed to whatever reward awaits me, you will inherit

enough of the leftover money that resides under deposit in Old Mister Coogan's bank downtown that you shall be able to purchase passage away from here and to the shores of the great and inspiring nation of America!"

"Wizard!" cried Tommy for she had wished ever so much over the previous three months to be taken away from this horrible place—of course, not until her grandma had passed on—and to the shores of the great and inspiring nation of America!

"But, Grandma," she sobbed. "There is so much to do and so much to learn. I need you! And it shall be such forever more."

"Now, now, dear. Stiff upper lip, what! Else I shall despair of having raised you—once your vagabond father deserted us for *the Orient* (she spits to one side)—in an incomplete or improper manner in spite of your many accomplishments and holdings. Let us be ever so merry and make my remaining time on this metaphorical plane of existence pass in good humour and pleasant conversation."

Tommy and her grandma were silent for many moments before her grandma spoke again. "You do realize that relatives, possibly so rich that they must own half of America by this time, are to be found in America, do you not? Your biological grandfather was not a good or honorable man, but he did provide a stipend for me, for your father (she spits to one side) and ultimately for my little Tommy. Go, child. Find your relatives and make them take you in, just as I did in your time of need!"

As Tommy considered her many options, options

that would greatly multiply she quickly realized, as soon as she was provided with the proceeds of the bank account awaiting her upon her grandma's demise, and came to a decision.

The old lady had to go and go quickly!

Taking a lavender-scented pillow from the settee, she placed it over the old woman's face and pressed down.

"Oh, grandma," she wailed as she felt the struggles become weaker and weaker and the old woman's chest to stop rising and falling. "Look what you have forced me to do! Now, I must escape to America where I will seek my fortunes and to escape from those minions of His Majesty's law, those miserable dicks from Scotland Yard!"

The motorcycle screeched to a stop at a four-way intersection way out in the middle of nowhere. All around the rider were tufts of scrub grasses, dying trees and old gopher mounds. A large sign, twisted with both age and juvenile attacks, would be seem leaning to one side by the edge of the Two of what must have once been at least six arrows indicated that "Lake Cop(ulation)land" would possibly be found to the left, and the **Swift Construction Co.** most probably in the opposite, or right, direction. That road was in such a state of disrepair that the rider dreaded a teeth-rattling ride up and down it. But, it had to be checked out, so the motorcycle

engine was gunned and, with a spray of gravel, it raced off along the least-rutted side of the lane.

"Where are the autos?" the cyclist muttered. "At this time of day, this place should be hopping with traffic. Perhaps they are afraid of bending their frames or flattening their tyres." A sickly-looking rodent was making its way across the road at the crest of one hill. The cycle skidded to a halt mere inches from creating a small stain in the dirt.

She kicked a small rock at it and it soon scurried away.

Looking down the hill, the rider espied a complex of buildings and at least one airstrip in the distance. From the current vantage point, there appeared to be precious little going on down there. No visible aircraft and only a handful of cars and trucks dotted around a trio of the least-dilapidated structures.

The driver let out a heavy sigh. *For this I came all the way here?* went through the driver's mind more than once.

Pushing off, the cycle careened down the road and through the unguarded main gate. To the near left was a three-story structure that appeared to be occupied, although sparsely. The cycle pulled into an unmarked spot fifty feet from the building and the driver turned it off. With the hot engine making ticking noises as it cooled, the driver undid the chinstrap from the helmet and pulled it up and off.

Blonde hair, more than shoulder-length,

cascaded out and down. The rider was most probably a woman when seen from the back. If viewed from the front there could be no mistake, even for a partially blind man, that the rider was definitely female.

And, they would see that the heavy chamois shirt she was wearing underneath the leather jacket she currently was unsnapping was at least one full size too small to contain her.

She regarded the building before her as she ran her fingers through her hair to try to unpack some of the indentations the helmet had scrunched into it. On top of the building and facing away—most probably toward the airstrip she had seen earlier—was a rather sad-looking control tower. Encircled by a metal walkway and railings, at least two of the four visible windows had been boarded up with plywood.

She walked around the right side of the building and stood in the shade at the back. In the middle of the compound was that airstrip she had seen along with taxiways on either side. To the far left was a mostly-overgrown straight stretch that she believed must be hiding a shorter, gravel-covered runway. This was borne out by having both the asphalt runway and the potential runway intersecting in a 'T' at one end.

She turned from side to side and looked at the various buildings. Of the seventeen she could see, eleven looked long-abandoned and ready to fall in

on themselves. Half of those had been hangars at one time. Most of the smaller, support buildings next to them were still in reasonable condition from what she could see.

She returned to the front of the big building. What must be a lobby was inside the nearby corner, and there were signs of life in that it had lights that were on and visible.

When she turned around she could see that the main gate and sentry hut both stood open, and that the eight-foot-high wire mesh fence went off in both directions. There were no signs of life.

The cyclist just stared in amazement at the sights all around.

"This bloody well can't be right! I must have the wrong company! I can't fathom why my cell phone's GPS would misdirect me to this dump!" She peered into the lobby through the water- and dust-spotted windows. It was deserted, but appeared to have been kept up. When she reached for the door she noticed the lettering on the glass:

SWIFT CONSTRUCTION

"I've come all this bloody way for this?" She shook her head in dismay, her shoulders sagging. Sitting down on the nearest raised thing she could find, a parking stop, she took her jacket all the way off, undid the chamois shirt and pulled it over her head exposing the light blue tank top she wore underneath. The effect could have turned a

Catholic priest straight!

“Well,” she said out loud as she stood back up and dusted off her leather riding pants, “I guess there’s nothing more to do than go in and find out what the bloody hell happened to the Swift Construction Company. I sure as bloody hell can’t go back to bloody England. Not with that warrant against me. Bloody old woman should have died weeks earlier and saved me the troubles!”

As she neared the door she noticed a sign posted to the right of it. In large, red lettering it read, "**Closed For Auction**" and a date was marked on it.

"Bloody heck, that’s just a few days away." Still in disbelief, the cyclist pulled at the door. It opened freely, so she stepped inside.

"This is not what I expected!" she exclaimed to herself. Her grandma had told her that it was a top ranking manufacturing company of electronics, avionics and airplane replacement parts. "I must have the wrong Swifts. I must!"

She still could not believe her eyes.

But, as she approached the combination information and reception desk, she saw a sign hanging above it proclaiming in fading gold script:

*SWIFT CONSTRUCTION
COMPANY*

Where the Future is Now!

Below that, and somewhat misaligned, were three rows of four surveillance monitors. The screens were dark with one exception and all it showed was a picture of her staring up at the camera sitting atop the surveillance monitors. The room was obviously being kept clean by someone, but there was nobody to be seen or heard.

The cyclist walked up to the counter and looked around the desk. A pair of multi-line phones and three computers—all but one turned off—were located at the front desk as well as in a couple of workstations to the sides. The center area had a small sign on the counter announcing that this was the RECEPTIONIST part of the kiosk. She walked to the left and then to the right checking the signs on those areas of the counter. SECURITY and INFORMATION were the two other empty spots.

She leaned over the counter to see what else might indicate that the company was even open for business.

In the middle of the desk area, inlaid on the counter top using at least five different colored woods, was a once-beautiful map of the building. Small flags on what appeared to be magnetic bases showed various names and titles of people and were set on the rooms they were ostensibly in. Several were on their sides—even more had been deposited in an area to one side marked “OUT.”

The name Damon Swift caught her attention,

and she could see that his office was to be found on the top floor just to the right of what look like a bank of two elevators. It was labeled the company's "Presidential Offices."

After waiting for a minute at the elevators behind the front desk, one of the doors slowly opened. She stepped inside and immediately stepped back out. The smell of must and dust and old lubricating oils assailed her nose. As the door began its closing routine she decided to take a deep breath and hop back in.

It didn't help as the automatic sensors pushed the door back open and she stood inside the cage for half a minute before they fully closed and the elevator began going up.

Surprisingly, and contrary to the speed of the doors, the elevator ride up to the third floor took just eight seconds. She stepped out, took a few deep breaths and walked down the hall to an open double doorway.

The room she now walked into had to be a secretary's front office. There was an L-shaped desk, one of the desk people called a Secretary's Return behind it, and at least a half dozen dark wood filing cabinets. Two of them had a drawer open and both seemed to be empty. The desk looked to have been unused for at least a couple weeks. Dust covered the computer and the two flat-panel display screens as well as the phone and paraphernalia of what a well-equipped office

needed. A small sitting area was in recessed into the far corner and an open door lead to another office. Hearing the sounds of someone moving around in there, she walked to and through the door.

A once tall man, now stooped with weariness, with graying blonde hair was standing in front of the room's only desk with his back to the door. He appeared to be shoving as many file folders as he could into a battered briefcase. He glanced over his shoulder as she came into the room and cleared her throat.

"What the bloody hell is going on around here," she demanded.

"You're not my daughter. What do you want?" he asked accusingly. He did a double take and had to steady himself by leaning back onto the desk. He fell upon his knees, and clasped his hands before his face. "Mercy!" he said. "Dreadful apparition, why do you trouble me?"

The cyclist shook her head. "Cut the Dickens, sir. In my short life I have known the works of Dickens, and you are no Charles Dickens!" Stepping forward, she reached out to steady the still-shocked man as he rose. "Are you all right, sir. I take it that you *are* Mr. Swift."

He looked up and into her piercing blue eyes. "By all the gods of Asgard, you are not him, but the very spitting image of him. I refuse to believe my own eyes. Who or what ghostly spirit are you

and why do you torture me at this time?"

"For starters," she told him, "there is no Asgard and therefore no ghosts from that mythical place. Only pitiable weak-minded weekend Norsemen still believe in that... or Valhalla for that matter. As to the matter of who I am, I am Thomasina Swift. I am from an offshoot lineage to yours with an in-common relative, your very own father. He was my grandmother's wartime paramour and planted his seed in her garden before abandoning her in the far off nation of Korea."

"What a strange accent you have, Thoma- whoever you are. If that is from South Africa, then you are barking up the wrong tree. We actively boycott selling to South Africa. Can't ever forgive for all that Apartheid stuff! And, it certainly isn't Australian. Ditto the terribly mangled accent of Kiwi's in New Zealand. Are you Welsh?"

"I'm English," she stated placing her hands on her hips. This served to make her look both more stern as well as moving her rather ample bosom into prominence.

"I have no relative in England," he stammered out, attempting to maintain eye contact with her. "I have one relative and one only, my daughter. He allowed his gaze to travel down from her eyes and was surprised at how beautiful she was. Full lips below a pert and ever-so-slightly upturned nose, a strong jaw, the aforementioned bosoms, and so forth.

“Grandma told me you have a son. What about him?” she challenged the man in front of her.

He sighed. “Dead these two long years. Both him and my wife, his mother.” His voice was full of sorrow and she could feel his sense of loss.

“I did not know that,” she admitted. Being a nurturing sort, she wanted to reach out to hold this lonesome and melancholy man, but she realized that a good hug from her was typically misunderstood by most of the male persuasion. She would rather avoid that reaction at present.

“They died in a car crash,” he told her. “A drunken lout, all liquored up, climbed into the cab of his big rig and drove off down the wrong side of the highway. They came around opposite ends of a curve...” he let out a small sob.

Now, she could not help herself and she stepped forward, placed her arms around him and pulled him gently to her. A few seconds later his sobs turned to soft moans. She released him and stepped back. “Uncle Damon!” she said, shaking her head.

“Sorry.” Regaining his composure, he told her, “If you are a true Swift relation, can you provide documentation and eye witness accounts or at least affidavits from three sane adults?”

The cyclist pulled out a well-used envelope and removed the five-page document from it. She opened it and handed it to the man.

“This is from your father’s solicitor—what you

would call a lawyer—and is dated all the way back to nineteen fifty three. It acknowledges my mother's birth as a result of our mutual ancestor's dalliance and provided for the exchange of shares of certain stocks from his portfolio for her releasing all claims against him. As rumour would have it, he had, while in Korea, a wife already and did not wish news of my grandmother and their brief encounter to reach her. Anyway, after leading her up the garden path, he got her up the duff, as they say, and left her in the pudding club."

Mr. Swift's eyes narrowed. "Spirit!" said Mr. Swift, "tell me no more! Conduct yourself home. Why do you delight to torture me?"

"I thought we agreed to cut the Dickens," she told him sternly. She rolled her eyes and made a 'harrumph!' sound. "Anyway, it is there in black and white. I am your niece removed once and therefore to be considered a close relative."

She stood there while he read through the document. In the end, he placed the papers on his desk and faced her, a tear streaming down his left cheek. "I have no possible response," he admitted.

"My grandma was a practical woman and once she knew her further claims would go for naught, she decided to make the very best she could of the situation. She raised my mother—named Amanda Swift by the way as grandma insisted she be allowed to use that family name or else she would not sign the papers—by herself being a nurse by

day and mother by night. My mother met and married a stocks and bonds dabbler who put her with child one year after their nuptials. Unfortunately, mother died giving birth to me and father never felt that he had it in him to be a parent. By the age of two—me, not him—he declared to grandma that he was off to far away Japan to seek fortune and he would return in a year’s time. In the interim he would provide for us both. He never did return and we never heard from or of him again. Not a sausage!”

Mr. Swift shook his head. “Sometimes parents can be real tur—“

“Mr. Swift!” she interrupted. “Watch your bloody language, please!”

“My apologies.”

“Accepted. I am fully, now that I must come the proper introduction of myself, Thomasina Hudson-Swift. Hudson was my father’s name and I have actually dropped the hyphen and made that my middle name. Officially I am Thomasina Swift. Hello, Uncle Damon!”

Mr. Swift slumped downward. “I am so sorry, Thomasina. I wish that your life had been an easier one. And, I wish that I could open my arms to you and provide you with a better life now, but the truth is that this company is about to close and have all its assets sold to pay our creditors. I lost my reason for living or caring when Tom and my dear Anne were killed. I often think it a wonder the

company survived this long.”

“Didn’t you have other who could take over the running of the company? People who *did* care and would do right by what you once built?”

He shook his head. “The only person I ever groomed to take the reigns at some point was my son, Tom. By god, how much you look like him. Almost exactly as I am certain he would have looked had he been born a beautiful woman. And, with the bosoms, obviously. Well,” he added with a somewhat silly grin, “at least born a girl and grown up into a woman such as yourself.”

“Why not groom your own daughter?” she demanded. “I saw her name on the locator downstairs.”

“I realize that I have not been fair to Sandra. She has always been a wonderful girl and often has pleaded with me to let her help, but I am a chauvinist from chauvinistic times and in my world, women—in Sandra’s case, girls—just aren’t what a proper industrial company needs at the helm.”

Thomasina crossed her arms under—as Mr. Swift’s eyes caught—her ample chest, pushing things up about two inches.

“Sandra is strong and she will rebound from all this,” he assured Thomasina. “She has turned out to be much stronger than me, and that is a fact I failed to see until it was far too late. She will move on and succeed in life even if I have failed to

provide a positive roll model. Or, financial stability these past two years.”

“Just like that? You give up, declare that your daughter, someone who obviously loves you and had done everything she might do for you and this company, short of—I hope and pray—prostituting herself, and all you can say is that she’ll get over this?”

He was too tired to growl at her the way he wished to, so all he said was, “She’s a Swift. Carrying on is what we do. Just as you will do after leaving here.”

With that, he stood back up, straightened his suit jacket and picked up the bulging briefcase. With no further words he walked out of the office and, from the quiet *bing* sound that came next, had entered the elevator and left.

Thomasina Swift looked around the sad office. She walked around the desk and sat in the chair of her uncle. Spinning around in it three or four times, she kept muttering, “Bloody! Bloody! Bloody!” until finally, tears came and cascaded down her face. She sobbed and sobbed and sobbed until she could do no more.

The sun may still be shining outside on the rest of the world, but Thomasina Swift’s world was dark and empty and icy cold at the moment.

Chapter Two: Friend or Foe

From the gloom of the outer room a voice spoke out.

“Who are you? What are you doing in daddy’s chair?” The voice was stern and definitely that of a teenage female. A very pretty young woman came into the room and stood in front of Thomasina with her hands on her hips.

Thomasina looked up and saw a statuesque, light blue-eyed blond—just like all the Swifts—with a very mature body. Tommy knew she must be Sandra Swift.

She stood up and placed her own hands on her own hips mimicking Sandra saying, “I’m your cousin from England, on grandpa Henry’s side.”

“No way. He had only one child... daddy!” she shot back.

“Way! He couldn’t keep it in his pants over in Korea.” Thomasina stood up right in front of her and her face found the light from the doorway. Sandra gasped and reached for the doorframe to steady herself as she saw Thomasina’s face. “My god. You look like a real girlie version of Tom,” she exclaimed with a look of disbelief on her face. Taking in the stranger’s extremely feminine figure, she added, “Quite girlie indeed. Who are you?” this time asked in a husky whisper.

“I’m Thomasina Swift, and as I mentioned your

grandfather Henry was my mother's father. It both is and isn't complicated and is a story to detail at the present time. Please sit down." She pointed to the other chair in front of the desk. "This will take some time and so please listen carefully as I intend to relate this only once." She spoke quietly and in a firm voice.

Sandra squelched a thousand questions racing through her mind and took the indicated chair facing Thomasina. As was her habit in time of stress, she set her hands under her legs to keep them from needlessly waiving about.

"Okay," she spoke. "Spill the story."

Starting with a weary sigh, Thomasina went through her family history.

Sandra asked a single question afterwards. "What do you want from us? If it's money, no can do, we're broke. If it's fame, that went out the window a couple years ago! If it's the clothes off our backs, well you can try but you are way too busy to fit into any of my blouses, and I don't believe you're the sort of woman who wears many oversized sweatshirts." Sandra stated this firmly and with no hostility in her voice. Thomasina wanted to scream her indignation over the situation, but knew that Sandra was just being honest.

"No, I don't want anything of monetary value from you or your family. My hope was to get to know more about part of the family. You're all that

I have left. My grandma mysteriously passed away a month ago. Her last request was for me to come to America and find all of you. She hoped I would be taken into the family and not be left alone in this world.”

Sandra shook her head sadly. “Sorry. Oh, and I hate Sandra unless it is in a business situation. Call me Sandy. Okay?”

“Sure, but, what happened, Sandy? Grandma said you Swifts had a booming business. And, I’m fairly certain she wasn’t making a pun about sonic booms from airplanes you might be building. I met your father earlier, but he just tried to quote *A Christmas Carol* at me and then refuse to believe who I am, and then he just walked out!”

Sandy breathed in and then out again. “Yeah. He’s done that a lot lately. I had a feeling it was going to turn out to be something exactly like this. Daddy only runs into the house and barricades himself in his study when faced with mysterious distant and previously unknown relatives. It’s a little thing with him. I came here to find out who it was this time. Look, I almost hate ‘Thomasina’ as much as I do Sandra. You remember that movie?”

“No.”

“Good. I’ll call you Tommy, if that’s alright?”

“I suppose,” Tommy replied with a sad shake of her head. Even here she could not escape that name.

“Grandpa Henry took over when he came back

from Korea. We always knew that he had a little secret but had no idea that it was a secret that led, eventually, to your birth. Wow. Talk about a randy old dog! Anyway, his father, great-grandpa Tom, did the inventing. He let Grandpa Henry run the company and hid in one of the outbuildings on their property inventing things. Grandpa was pretty bad as a company manager and the business was going downhill fast. They had a big fight one night where many plates and glasses were broken, and several pool cues were snapped in half. Funny that. Nobody in our family has ever had a pool table. Hmmm?

“Great-grandpa Tom flew the last of the giant dirigibles we ever made down to South America in eighty-six. Well, when I say last built, it was actually—oh, did I tell you that the name of it was the *Silver Cloud*?” Tommy shook her head and tapped her watch meaningfully. “Well, he built it like a whole lifetime ago, back in the thirties, but had the company refurb it before the expedition.”

“And, to cut a long story short... the end!” stated Tommy. “Come back to today, Sandy. What the bloody hell has been going on here recently?”

“Okay, in the great tradition of not running this company very well, daddy took over when his father disappeared, never to be seen again deep in the jungles of South Ameri—“

“Sandy!” Tommy interrupted sternly. “Get back to the point, please.”

“Right. Daddy started small by making replacement parts for the avionics in planes and their computer controls. The company became known for making durable devices. And, he soon was big in miniaturization.” Sandra’s voice spoke with pride as she told Tommy of her father’s accomplishments.

“The company fortunes rode on wars. Up for Viet Nam, then down until Iraq. Then up until that was over, then down and then back up for another go at Iraq. As so on. Unfortunately, after the second Iraqi days of wine and roses, things sort of plateaued out. Daddy mothballed most of the buildings and ran a tightened ship. During all this he married my mother and had Tom and me and we grew up and had fun and everything that made the future look great.

“Tom and I loved school and we both were way smarter than anyone in our grade levels. Tom loved coming to work so much that he worked extra hard and graduated at fifteen. I managed to graduate at sixteen, but by that time Tom was gone.” She looked at Tommy with a tear running down her alabaster right cheek.

“Tell me more about Tom, Sandy.”

“Well, he was tall and blond, like me, with a firm jaw line and good biceps and a nice tight set of buns...” Sandy sighed and seemed to go into a little world all her own. Tommy coughed to get her attention. “Oops! Sorry. Anyway, you couldn’t

keep Tom away from the company. He was here twelve hours a day and, the crew loved him. They treated him like he was a real employee and not just the boss' ultra-bright son, and someone who could simply say, 'I hate that person,' and probably get them fired. Plus, Tom *did* make a difference around here. He built circuit boards and he even improved on them. By the time he turned sixteen he was dad's right hand man and was being introduced to the rigors of managing the company. It wasn't what he wanted to do so I told daddy that I'd like to learn how to manage and he just patted me on the top of my head and told me that 'It's a man's job, Sandra. You'll see that when you get a little older.' Older? Poop!"

"Back to Tom, please."

"Yeah. So, in the fall of oh-nine Tom and Mother were killed in a car accident." Sandra's voice broke and tears started to stream down both of her cheeks.

Tommy reached over and wiped away the most recent tears and then took Sandy in her arms and gave her a long hug.

"My goodness," Sandy said when they broke the embrace. "How do you function around those?"

"We aren't here to discuss my chest, Sandy. I need to know what is going on here and why your father has let the company fall apart."

"I'm sorry," stammered Sandra as she wiped

her eyes. "I haven't had a good, cleansing cry in a couple of years now. You must think I'm being a little girl." She leaned back in her chair and took a few breaths.

"No," answered Tommy. "It is a womanly thing and we should celebrate our ability to release emotions through our tear ducts. As a matter of fact I just had a good cry for myself before you came in."

A brief moment of shared embarrassed laughter came between them as they realized how much they had in common.

"Does anyone know exactly what happened?" Tommy had to know the rest of the story.

"They say they both died instantly. It was very early morning, about one a.m. They were driving back from a science symposium at the college. Tom hadn't bothered to get his license so Mother drove him. An eighteen-wheeler shot across the road and hit them head on. The car just disintegrated. The drunken murderer in the truck walked away. The police found him several hours later sleeping it off in the woods. By then it was too late for a blood-alcohol test. He was charged with reckless endangerment with death resulting, and leaving the scene of an accident." Her voice got cold, "Three weeks later, the day before his trial, he mysteriously died in a fire at his house. They say it burned like a building that had been doused with four gallons of kerosene from a jerry

can they never found over in the lake, and that one of the ceiling rafters must have dropped down and beaten in his skull like a baseball bat might. Go figure!”

Tommy nodded and smiled. She well knew how *those* sort of misunderstandings could happen.

“Daddy took it hard. He lost the will to do anything. We had enough good contracts that the employees could fulfill, so things worked for the first year. Then, daddy made a rambling address at a conference and walked out half way through babbling something that nobody could figure out. The word got out about his mental state. I tried to take over running things after that but it was too late. Besides, who wanted to risk dealing with a company that has a teenage girl at the big desk?”

“I might have hired a figurehead—a man—and then running everything behind the scenes,” Tommy advised her cousin. “Works on TV.”

“Naw! The company did one of its inevitable downturns and is now in about the same shape it was in when grandpa Henry was running it. In trouble. We started to sell some of our equipment but it wasn’t enough. The rest of our equipment is up for auction off in a few days. I can’t stop it.”

Sandra rose, smoothed down her blouse, absent-mindedly checked her breath, and walked over to a portrait of an elderly man. Tommy came to stand behind her. Breathing close to Sandy’s right ear, she asked, “Who is that?” pointing at the

picture. A brass plate on the bottom frame read: Barton Swift 1860 – 1930.

With a slight shudder, Sandy moved her head away from Tommy's lips and swung the portrait to the side exposing a small safe. She opened it—Tommy memorized the combination in case it might come in handy at some later time—and took out a note pad held closed with a rubber band.

“I was pretty sure daddy wouldn't take this,” she said to Tommy. “It's Tom's dream book. At least, that's what I call it. Every time he had an idea he put it in here. Original idea, improvements, even pipe dreams like his two-man mini-rocket. Yeah! Like that'll ever happen!” She snorted. “He carried it around all the time. For an unknown reason he left it at home that terrible day. It's all we have left of his dreams and his somewhat utopian view of the world he wanted to build.” Her tone was sad as she whispered the final sentence.

The sun had gone down twenty minutes earlier and the room was dark. A small pool of light came through the doorway and illuminated the chairs where the girls were sitting. With a deep sigh, Sandy got up first and held out her hand to Tommy.

“Let's get out of here. There's too much angst and sadness swarming around in this room. And the smell of daddy's Aqua Velva. I need to get outside.” They walked silently to the elevators and Sandy pressed the Down button. They waited and

waited and finally Tommy suggested taking the stairs.

“No. It smells even worse in the stairway. Let’s wait—oh! Here it is,” Sandy said as the bell sounded and the doors began their inexorably slow opening routine.

Two minutes later they made it out of the building. They stood by Tommy’s motorcycle.

Sandy gave the bike an appreciative look over. “I’ve always wanted to have one of those,” she practically purred. “Take me for a ride, Tommy?”

“Sorry, Sandy. I’ve only got the one helmet and it is the law that all riders and passengers of any motorized cycle in this state must wear one at all times. Even on private property. Perhaps some day, but for now only I will be riding off on this little thing.”

Sandy tried to pout, it was something she was usually very good at, but she didn’t have the emotional energy anymore.

“I’m sorry, Sandy. I shouldn’t have come here today. Grandma was wrong. I can find no hope for a future here. Your family used it up a long time ago. It is a waste and it should not have happened. I know you love your father, but he should have realized he no longer had the ability to manage and should have turned it over to someone. You, perhaps. I doubt if you could have cocked it up any more than he did. In fact, you might have been able to use your growing feminine wiles to make

things work in ways he never could. So sad, really. You're young, strong and intelligent, and have a dynamite figure. Take it and get away from here. Run. Start a new life. You'll stagnate and possibly die here if you stay. I can't. Hey! I've just had a notion. Come back to England with me. We can start over together. We could be great friends. Very close friends. I know it." There was joy in her voice over the prospect of a life with Sandy as her companion.

Sandy eyed her cousin. "No, I can't. It isn't that I'm not intrigued by the prospects, but... You may be right, there's not much left for me except my dad. Well, him and a few trusted employees. Okay. Him, a few trusted employees and a feeling of obligation to see it through. I really am sorry, though. I'm certain we would be very good together." Her voice was strong again.

Tommy opened the saddlebag on the back of the bike and pulled out her chamois shirt. She looked around once more as she put it on. Sandy also looked, almost longingly, as Tommy slowly pulled it over her head. A few stars were in the sky. Only two of the buildings had lights on, but most of the complex was dark. It looked like a ghost town. Tommy could not see a future here.

As she was taking a last look around and putting her leather jacket on, Sandra quietly opened the cycle's weathered storage satchel and slipped the diary into the saddlebag.

Why not? Sandy thought. *Maybe Tommy'll come back and return the dairy and I can see her again. I'd really like to see more of her.* Sandra blushed at that thought. *No. I really do want to see Tommy again. Maybe we can work something out in the light of day that this dismal night won't reveal.*

She watched as Tommy swung her right leg over the saddle and settled onto the motorcycle. Giving it a good kick, she started it.

Thomasina held out her hands to Sandy.

"I know we could have become very special friends, Sandy," Tommy whispered as they clasped hands for the last time. "But Fate is not with us. Please take my advice and leave as soon as you can. You will always find a bed at my modest home in England. Granny left it to me."

A final tear slid down her face. She leaned over and gave Sandy a little peck on the cheek, and then a slightly longer one on the lips.

Sandy stepped backwards with her eyes wide open, but a small smile playing across her recently kissed lips.

Tommy pulled her helmet over her head, arranged the hair so it was comfortable and gave Sandy a final smile. She pulled down the visor and squeezed her cousin's left hand. With that, she gunned the cycle into action and disappeared into the night.

Chapter Three: Making a Dream

“Yo, Sandra Swift! Show yourself, you devious minx!” shouted Tommy in a loud voice that reverberated through the entire building. “You’ve got some explaining to do, Sandra! Come out, come out, wherever you are. Show yourself, woman.” As she walked around the Assembly building she continued to yell.

Finally and from above her, a voice squealed back, “Here I am, Tommy!”

Looking up, Tommy saw a group of four doorways along a catwalk raised twenty feet above the floor on the rear wall. Sandra came out of the first room and leaned over the iron railing. The top three buttons of her blouse were undone and she was in peril of spilling out.

Tommy saw this but chose to keep with the approach she had practiced on the drive out. “Damn you to bloody hell, Sandra Swift. Damn you and damn the notebook and damn this fetid and failing company. I’m staying! God help me, but I’m staying!” she shouted back running up the stairs. When she got in front of Sandy, they took each other’s hands and then embraced.

“I am very happy, Tommy, but how come?” she laughed trying to look innocent as she stepped back a little. “What might have changed your mind? Last night you seemed ready to put this

behind you. Put me behind as well,” she added a little sadly. She was looking intently at Tommy’s face.

“To tell you the truth I should be as mad as a wet snake at you for that dirty trick you pulled on me. And, don’t give me that ‘Moi’ look. You know. *Have* you read that fantastic diary? Do you know what it really contains. What level of genius Tom had. Einstein, Newton, Hawking and Nostradamus all rolled into one teenage boy. Oh, Sandra, how desperately I now wish that I could have known him. What a great mind he had.”

“And, great buns,” Sandy reminded her.

Smiling, Tommy responded, “Right. Do I need to remind you that he was your brother? Anyway. What fantastic things he could have done. To think, he was just twelve and up to barely eighteen when he wrote most of this stuff. I just can’t believe the way his mind functioned.”

Sandra hugged her again and said, “I knew you would want to help me once you got to know Tom. I mean, help us, of course. Us. He’s one of the chief reasons why I want to keep this place going. Come on, let’s sit down and talk about this. I stole a bottle of sherry from daddy’s liquor cabinet and snuck it in here. We can have a drink to celebrate.”

They both walked back into the room Sandy had come out of. Several boxes sat on a worktable in the middle of the room and the aforementioned bottle with a pair of glasses sat behind them, out of

sight to anyone happening to walk past the doorway.

From the look of things it was obvious that Sandy had been packing.

“I see you’re hedging your bets, Sandy,” Tommy observed. “Sherry to celebrate but packing all the same. I wonder what will win here.”

She looked past her younger cousin at the four large, dirty windows lining the rear wall, the two computer workstations on the right side wall and a 55-inch Plasma TV mounted on the opposite wall. It looked like two more computer workstations had been connected to the screen, but they were now missing. Everything in the room look modern and well kept. The room was bright and clean with the exception of the dirt on the outside of the windows.

Seeing Tommy’s pursed lips at the state of the glass, Sandy told her, “Sorry. I don’t do those. Sit.”

They pulled out two chairs and faced each other like they had last night. But with a different feeling. It was not gloomy; there was hope and excitement in the air.

Sandy reached for the bottle and glasses, and began to pour as Tommy began to talk.

“Do you realize what crappy signage you have out in this area? When I left here last night I got lost and ended up almost driving through a parking

lot and into that bloody great lake a mile away. The water was choppy from the wind and I reached into my saddlebags for my gloves and scarf. That's when I felt the Diary. It was warm and inviting in my hand. I just had to take it out and read it. There was a light on by a side door of a concession stand. I sat down on the ground and read it."

Tommy's eyes practically glazed over. She took a large gulp of the sherry and made a face. "Egads!" she said handing the glass back. "That's terrible. I'll have another. Make it a double. Oh, Sandy, it spoke to me almost as if he were there reading his own words. He started out speaking like a child and then it morphed into a mature voice. It was soft and very precise. Everything in that diary is pure genius. It was clear and exact and how I would have written things. By god, Sandy, he was a man with a vision. We'll never know what he might have accomplished, but we have a glimpse of it here. We have to bring it to life." She gulped down the second drink and set the glass on the table, waiving off a third serving.

Sandra tilted her head and asked, "You can really make sense out of all that stuff? I've got an IQ of 138, but that's worse than scrambled Greek to me."

"Of course I can! Given technology today there's no way to figure out how he intended to build most of it. But it is as plain as day. A lot of it

already exists in one form or another. 138, huh?" She shook her head after deciding to not tell Sandy that her own IQ was in the upper 140s. "Since his death there have been incredible advancements in computers and microelectronics. You can't know this since I haven't mentioned it, but I hold a couple of degrees in the sciences. Electronic Engineering is one of them and Nano-crystalline Structures is another. And, Advanced Applied Digital Technology is the third. Where was I? Oh. When it comes to brains I'm no slouch! So how do we keep this place open?"

"With money... lots of money," was the reply. "Unless I can find an incredibly rich man to seduce by this Friday, I think we're hosed." Sandy looked sad again.

"Well I don't have a lot, but I'll gladly give you all I have. If you did find this rich man, would you actually..." She left the rest unsaid.

"I'm not certain. Don't they say desperate times deserve desperate measures, or something like that? Anyway, thanks Tommy for your offer, but if you can't pony up a million or more it won't help," she answered back, feeling hopeless again.

"What if we can come up with a radical new product to sell? A real primo, top notch item?" She had a mischievous look on her face. "Could you interest investors? Your banker?"

"Sure Tommy, Sir Galahad is going to come to life, kneel down in front of us and give us his

kingdom and personal wealth. Or, Steve Jobs will send down the next incredible i-device plans. Not.”

“No, he won't, but Tom kind of did.”

“What!” Sandy gasped, not believing what she had just heard. “Have you gone ga-ga reading that diary?”

“No. And yes. He did! It's among the final things he described in that diary. He wanted to find a way to combine a cell phone with a touch tablet but with a difference. Picture a very nice-looking diver's wristwatch that turns into a full-sized tablet. There's a drawing of it in here. If it can be accomplished, it's a marvel of engineering. When he wrote and drew it, most of what he hoped to do was barely on the drawing boards of most companies.”

Sandy shook her head slowly. “Things on this Earth haven't gotten all that much further along, Tommy. I'm not sure what reality you live in, but in mine, that sort of thing is science fiction.”

“I think we can put most of it together using current technology and, best of all, it starts out as a watch bracelet on your wrist. You'll never have to shove your phone into your bra again. If, that is, you have any room in there.” And Tommy laughed at this because she had tried that so many times herself and found that ‘the room’ was far too crowded for it to be comfortable for more than a minute or two.

“No way. It can't be done!”

Tommy pulled three sheets of paper out of her backpack. “Oh, no? Take a look at this.”

Sandy looked over the drawings and notes turning the drawings around and around trying to find some sense of order she might understand. She shook her head in amazement. “Okay. I understand business and I understand a bit about mechanics, but this?” She sighed. “How will you do it? It looks complicated. We only have until Friday.”

Tommy sat there, lost in thought for a moment. “It’s just Tuesday. Does we have to have a finished product or just a schematic?”

“I guess a schematic would do, but the real thing would make it a cinch. And, I’ll have to develop a business plan for it and sales projections and probably even a marketing plan. If I start right now I can have all that ready in time for the next Olympics!”

Tommy chose to ignore the sarcastic response from Sandy. “I definitely could have the schematic by Friday, but not the bracelet.”

“Would someone helping you make a difference?” Sandy asked, although she already knew it would, if it was the right person.

“Yeah, it would. But I still don't see how we could make it in time. A trio of static models showing the three phases of the bracelet is a

definite possibility. A large working model of all three phases... I don't know. It's a long shot. Showing off the real thing? Never." She regretted having to tell Sandy the truth.

"We'll see about that," was her smiling reply. "I want you to meet someone. A special someone here at the company. I'll be back in an hour or less. So just sit tight until we come back. Play *Angry Birds* or whatever. Just stay here. Okay?"

"Whatever you say, Sandy. Are any of these computers functioning?" she asked.

"Yes, all of the ones still on desks. I have to keep them connected to demonstrate that they still work when the auction happens on Saturday. Buyers won't buy a pig in a poke, or non-working electronics, as the old saying goes."

"What is the password?"

"Where the future is now," was Sandy's straight-faced reply. "No spaces, the first letter is a cap and the final 'o' in 'now' is a zero."

"Of course it is." And Tommy laughed.

By the time someone showed up forty minutes later, Tommy had the big CAD computer running and had started creating the electronic schematic for the phone bracelet.

"Excuse me, Missy. I was told to come and talk with the British lady about a project. That you?" An older man with salt and pepper hair and glasses was standing at the door. He was what is generally

described as being stocky, his shoulders and arms were muscular and his hands were huge.

Tommy looked appreciatively at those large hands.

“Yes, sir,” was her reply as she shook her head and got up from the computer.

“Jesus to Jesus, Missy. You do look like him,” he said as he sized her up with hard, brown eyes. “To be straight with you, if you're trying to jerk the Swifts around with some kind of English nonsense while just trying to help yourself to the dried and bleached bones of this company, you'll have to answer to me.” His voice was stern and his huge hands clenched and unclenched.

“No, sir. It's no trick. I am a Swift, and when I came here I never expected this. I don't know if I can help them, but I'm going to try. You can bet your giant hands on that!” she exclaimed vehemently.

“Spoken like a true Swift, Missy. Like a true Swift.” His face softened as he looked at his own hands.

“Sir, you have me at a disadvantage. I don't know your name. Sandy rushed out of here without telling me who she was going to send over.”

“Hank Avery. Sandy calls me her ‘uncle’ but I'm not. Then again, I think of her as being my niece. If not as a daughter. What I'm trying to say is that although we are not actually related, we are

related by other factors. You English got anything like that? Ah, forget I said that. Back to me. I'm the best electronic engineer in town." He held out his huge left hand. Tommy reached out and shook it. His large hand was strong and warm.

"Sandy tried to describe your plans. The girl is bright and pretty but no engineer. I had no idea what to expect. Let me look. So, Tom thought of this?" he asked a minute later.

Tommy opened her backpack and took out the diary. She opened it to Tom's notes and showed him. Then she showed him her drawing and notes. He studied both of them for a while and nodded.

"Yep, Missy, I see what Tom was going for. But he didn't leave enough information on these pages of his to make something out of it, yet your own notes outline a whole device. Did you take some notes out of this book that you forgot to show me?" He was not criticizing her but just wondering.

"No Mr. Avery. That's the sum total of it." Tommy was glad that he was quick on noticing the work she had already completed. Fortunately, she knew the CAD program on the computer so had been able to get started immediately.

"Then I've got to hand it to you Missy. Well done, you. If Sandy thinks it's worth a shot, I'm game. Didn't plan to sleep the next couple days anyway. So what do you want me to do?"

“Hey you two, come back to Earth! It’s way late. Don’t you think it’s time to stop? Like, for food?” Sandy stood there shaking the three bags of fast food in her hands. She had frequently seen two heads together like theirs, working opposite of each other. Four hands working as if a single person was in control. It could be almost ballet like. Her father and Tom use to do it all the time.

“Oh, hi, Sandy. Just about finished,” Tommy said when she turned around to the door. “Great! Chow! I’m starved.”

“Me, too!” declared Mr. Avery reaching for one of the bags.

“What! You got it finished?” her eyes went wide in amazement.

“No, you ditzzy blond,” Tommy answered back with a grin, “we simply finished the schematics for the bracelet. Mr. Avery is a Godsend. He knows more about micro-circuitry than I ever imagined one old man could.”

Mr. Avery turned red at such praise. Then, he turned even more red as her last crack registered.

“So, what now?” Sandy asked around her latest bite of sandwich. “Can we build this thing by Friday?”

“We can do a lot of it, but the micro-processor has to be completed, turned into a photo-miniature, etched into a multi-layered silicon wafer in a clean

environment, tested and most likely redone several times to get it right, and that takes months to set up.”

“Okay, the schematics will have to be it.” She was disappointed, but even Sandy knew what they had just done in a few hours was a miracle. They finished eating and returned to work.

“Ready, Mr. Avery? Hit start on the printer and let's see what we've got.” Two pages came out of the schematic printer before the “Ink Low” light came on, and they had to wait for Sandy to retrieve a new black cartridge from the supply room in the Administration building. Mr. Avery restarted the printer and pages began coming out one after another. In a few minutes they were studying them on the worktable. With Sandy now drowsing in boredom in one corner, Tommy and Mr. Avery sat back satisfied that the schematic was accurate.

“High five me, Missy. Not to be disrespectful to Sandy there, but it is like old times working for both Mr. Swift and Tom. I do miss it.”

“Let's go you two,” Sandra said opening one eye. “Grab another tall coffee and get enough caffeine in you to work until at least midnight. After I get a full night's sleep, I'll pick this stuff up in the morning. Assuming you get it done I'm almost certain I can convince someone to give us lots of money.

“Mr. Avery, what are you doing here? It’s four in the morning! We just left here a few hours ago.”

Mr. Avery stretched and looked back at Tommy through bloodshot eyes. He was soldering components onto a circuit board under a magnifying glass.

“Couldn’t sleep,” he lied, “so I thought I’d throw something tangible together for Sandy’s presentation.” He picked up the soldering iron again. “Mind holding these pliers over here so I don’t burn out those components? I hope your hands are steadier than mine!” While she helped him, she studied all the components he had scattered over the table.

“Do you honestly think you can make one of the bracelets out of that mess of used parts? And in...” she glanced at the clock on the side wall, “... in less than five hours?”

“Heck no! What do you think I am? A Keebler elf?” He exclaimed. “I think I can make a large working model. It’ll be twice normal size. Make a great display unit, huh?”

“Yes, it would, but you don’t have the processors and other miniature circuitry. What you do have there won’t fit into the enlarged bracelet. Have you been hitting Sandy’s sherry bottle?” She looked at him with puzzlement.

Shaking his head and grumbling, he pulled out a briefcase and opened it.

"I just got a start on this," he said pointing to the briefcase. Inside was a small radio transmitter and a battery glued to the bottom. "All the computer stuff into this and it will run the whole thing. It's a cheat, I know. We'll run a flat cable up your arm—you'll have to wear a long sleeved shirt—that will connect stuff. I've got a package of mortician's putty and we'll smear that over the cable so nobody sees it. Unless they look close." He was looking at Tommy to see her reaction.

"Mr. Avery, just as long as it is previously unused putty. I think I love you!" She favored him with the sort of smile that made his entire body ache. "Okay, What's the game plan?"

"We use these off-the-shelf processors and just wire them together. It'll run a little slow but for our purposes, it should do. Besides, almost anyone you demo it to is going to be so flummoxed by what they see, they won't even realize it's not all that fast!"

She loved the canniness of the idea. They went to work like kids in a toy store.

"You know if you're going to make a habit of this I'll just have to spread rumors about both of you. I'm sure that Mrs. Avery wouldn't have liked it at all."

Without looking up, Mr. Avery said, "Sandra Swift. All I have to say to you is... storeroom in

hangar number five, three summers ago and a certain blond-headed young man...” He left the sentence hanging.

Sandy turned bright red and then paled. She quickly said, “Love the hard work you two are doing. Got to hand it to you. Noting to see but hard work. Just work. I’d swear on a stack of religious tracts about that!”

Tommy and Mr. Avery stood at the worktable with their heads bent over looking at a delicate piece of electronics. Tommy turned around and stared at Sandy. The blond turned red again and began to breathe funny.

“Naughty girls must get out of here, Sandy!” said Tommy with a sly grin. She had been learning all sorts of interesting things about her cousin in the past few days. “Come back at eleven when we’ll be ready. Go away!”

Sandy shook her head, tried to steady her breathing and left muttering under her breath, “It never happened. He never touched me. Besides, I have no idea *who* he means...”

Two hours later she called out, “May I come in or are you still fiddling with things?”

“Come on in, Sandy. Mr. Avery and I have ceased fiddling,” Tommy answered back. Whatever was on the table was covered with a cloth and both engineers were sitting at a side desk arm wrestling as they waited for Sandy to come in.

They jumped up when she gasped at the sight. Tommy went to the worktable and yanked off the cloth.

“Ta-da!” she said, and struck the sort of pose a magician’s assistant might take when her boss had just made the elephant disappear.

Sandra pretended to be nonchalant as she ambled over to the table and glanced its contents. She picked up the bracelet holding it at arm’s length, as if admiring a piece of pottery. At six inches long and three-quarters of an inch wide, it looked just like an electronic watch band connected to the edges of a two-and-a-half inch flat watch surface. The bottom was arced slightly to fit around a wrist. The band looked like tiny, silver, linked sausages.

“Set it on your wrist,” Tommy prompted.

When Sandy did that, it practically leapt from her fingers and snapped around the wrist automatically. And, though it had appeared to have several too many links for her size, it fit her perfectly.

“Oh, my!” she said. “It isn’t exactly fine jewelry, but I like the ease of putting it on.” She looked at the display model and then the smaller one on her wrist. They were exact. She looked at the other two. “What the heck?”

“Mr. Avery, it was your idea, so you explain it.” Tommy stepped back to open the floor for Mr.

Avery.

“Well Sandy, we couldn’t make a real bracelet. We don’t have time. So we did the next best thing. We totally faked it.”

Sandy’s eyes went wide and a grin appeared on her face. She had recently discovered that she liked sneaky things and this fit right in. “Uncle Hank, if this is a scam, I do not approve. However, if it is an incredible simulation of what the real thing will be, I do approve. Boy, do I. Also, I see that you have managed to corrupt my cousin in less than one day. Well done, sir!”

He ignored her remarks pulling the briefcase out and opening it. It was packed with electronics. He pointed to different groups.

“That runs the cell phone and this runs the tablet. This switches them back and forth. You’ll have a tiny rocker switch on the palm of your hand for that function. That bit is a transmitter and receiver that BlueTooths all of the signals to the model. With all this not in the thing, we can make the model work.” He took a deep breath. “One thing. There is no room for a cooling fan, so you will need to put the three ice packs in that cooler over there inside in these three spots before you go in for the demo. You’ll have fifteen minutes of run time before things will probably melt down. Can you do it?”

She nodded yes even though her mind was screaming, “No, no, no!” But, if there was one

thing she could do fast, it was using a cell phone. She had the bills to prove it.

“Okay, that's the easy bit. The standard phone operation. Now, here's all the computer stuff.” And he went on to explain the rest of the “magic” of the bracelet.

Chapter Four: Money—

"Please, Sir, May I Have Some More?"

“Mr. Billings, I appreciate you for giving me a few minutes me on short notice.” Sandy stood in front of the Shopton Community Bank's manager. He was short and fat and balding yet considered himself to be devastating to women. He favored her with a sneering smile. She shook his hand after she put down a box on the edge of the desk and a briefcase on the floor. He attempted to kiss it but she pulled it away. Then, without his seeing, she wiped her hands on the back of her cream and peach-colored business suit pants. She calmed her creeping flesh from his touch.

“That's all right,” he told her glancing around, “but I can only give you ten minutes. I have to go out this afternoon. So, what's in the box?”

“Ick! Keep your slimy hands off me you perv!” was what she was *thinking* as she spoke aloud, “The product that is going to reinvent Swift Construction.” Now in her Sandra persona, she opened the box and placed something on the table.

Billings could see that it was a Lucite forearm and hand with the bracelet on it. As he was looking at it, she tapped her foot against a hidden button on the briefcase at her feet. Hopefully, only she heard the tiny *beep* of the computer booting up.

“I'll try to be quick and to the point,” she began

while actually intending to stall for the fifty seconds it would take for things to become operational. At that moment, two teenagers came bursting into the office followed by a somewhat frazzled-looking woman. Billings' face blanched.

"Sorry Dear, but you know how the kids are. Oh, hello there, Sandy. How's your father? I hear he's been... uh... under the weather lately." She was trying to sound as polite as possible about Mr. Swift's incompetence with the company.

"He's better, Mrs. Billings. Thanks for asking." Sandra said with only a hint of sarcasm as she sighed to herself, but looked at the two kids. The boy was about fifteen and the girl was perhaps thirteen. Sandy thought, *It's going to take a lot of years for her to grow into those giant beaver teeth and get on the acceptable side of homely.*

"Please stay, if you can," she told the newcomers as a thought hit her on how to use them to her advantage. "You might find this interesting." She reached casually into her pocket and pressed a small fob she had there.

A phone ring came from the large model on the desk. Sandra touched the top of the watch face and they all watched as one side of the bracelet rolled out. It stopped when it was eight inches long and three and a quarter inches tall. The left half of the full-color touch screen lit up and a full cell phone keypad appeared. The right held what appeared to be a contact list. Sandra reached out and plucked

the phone off the model's wrist and held it to her ear.

“Hello Tommy. Yes, I’m just showing him the phone. Talk to you later.” She touched the Off button on the screen and then put the phone down on the desk turned around so that they could see that the rest of the bracelet folded itself flat into the back of the phone and was out of sight again. She then put her arm out to show them the watch bracelet on her wrist.

“As you can see, the model on the desk is twice the size of the actual bracelet-phone. We did that to make it easier to demonstrate to larger groups. Now to show you the real thing.” She touched the top of the watch on her wrist and it rolled out. When it stopped, a phone screen appeared as before. She then closed it, hoping that they didn't notice it was just a static picture. The entire surface was a fake. She quickly picked up the model phone and ran through its many features. It was loaded with more apps than anyone could ever use. With a touch of a button the phone number display area turned into a keyboard for texting.

“Wow!” exclaimed the boy. “Dad, you gotta get me one! Get it as an early birthday gift. Mom promised that his years my present would be a doozy!” And his eyes were gleaming with avarice.

“If he gets one, I get one, too!” insisted his ugly little sister.

“And that's not all.” Sandra tried to ignore them

and keep the pace up. “We call this ‘Entertainment Mode.’” She touched the bottom of the screen saying, “I just select for pictures and then touch this button.” The entire touch screen expanded with an additional three inches flipping up and three more flipping down. Then the entire thing seemed to grow outwards. Soon it was much more than two times its size. It had gone from eight by three and a quarter inches to sixteen by nine inches. Sandra placed the expanded model phone on the desk and held out her arm again.

She touched the bottom of the watch face and the bracelet side rolled into its phone size then it folded out to the expanded size. She carefully pressed the center button in her palm, under the mortician’s wax and the screen appeared to light up. She immediately placed it face down on a piece of paper on the desk so that they could compare it to a letter-size piece of paper. It covered almost half of it. She picked it back up facing her and touched it again to close it, turning it back to a bracelet. She placed it to her wrist and it clasped around on its own. She then ran through its many modes using the display model.

“The expanded mode can be used for view pictures, movies, TV shows and playing games. It has a pixel count of 1,280 by 840 and is totally HD ready. While in game mode the bottom left and right corners display the controllers.” She showed them the display icons.

She returned it to bracelet mode and placed it back in the display arm. It clasped it firmly.

“Any questions?” She asked hoping that her information overload was in stun mode. She saw that it was.

“Daddy! Get us one. Now!” both of the kids yelled, and Mrs. Billings nodded her head *yes*. Her eyes were imploring and Sandy could see that they had, like many parents with a bit of money, spoiled their children to the point that their lives were now a constant misery. Smiling pleasantly at the banker, she thought, *Serves you right you smarmy twerp. Maybe I should tell your wife how you practically drooled on my hand before she came!*

Mr. Billings looked at all three members of his family and blanched again. Now how he was going to say no to buying bracelet-phones for each of them if they weren't to ever be on the market. He knew he had no way out but to offer the Bank's support.

“Miss Swift you're in luck,” he said with a smile. “The Board of Trustees meets this evening at the Shopton Yacht Club. Could you be there at nine with this demonstration?”

Sandra almost yelled with delight on hearing this. She took a slow and steady breath.

“Yes, sir! I'll be there!”

She made it back at the Assembly building

shortly after midnight. Tommy and Mr. Avery rushed out to her as soon as she drove up. The tears in her eyes told them all they needed to know.

All she would say was, “The bastard!”

The next morning Mr. Billings tried to reach Sandra. He had felt blindsided at the meeting and spent most of the morning finding a solution to help her.

“Come on Sandra, answer the phone! For god sakes, answer it!” Mr. Billings was yelling at his handset. He slammed down the phone and angrily paged his secretary. “Keep trying to reach Miss Swift. If you get her, tell her to call me immediately. Give her my private my cell number.”

He left the bank in a foul mood. If he had to rip the town apart, personally, he was going to find her! As he stormed out, the thought that kept searing through his mind was, “The bastard!”

“Mr. Samson I would like you to meet Sandra Swift of the Swift Construction Company.” He stepped aside so that Sandra could step forward to the bar and up to Mr. Samson.

It had taken almost five hours before Mr. Billings had decided to head out to the Construction Company to see if Sandy was there. She was, but it took another half hour of convincing before she agreed to meet him at the

Yacht Club in the late afternoon.

Sampson was tall with black hair, a sharp jaw line and an athletic build. He was young, about twenty-five to twenty-seven. Sandy couldn't help but notice that he had a broad chest, amazing upper arms and no wedding ring!

“Yes, Mr. Billings. I know all about our guest. I've followed the troubles of the Swifts for some time. After last night's demonstration I knew that what she is trying to sell is a game changer. I want to be part of that. It intrigues and excites me,” he said pointedly looking Sandy over from face to waist. “The question now is, how agreeable is Miss Swift going to be in letting me help.” He took a sip of his drink. “Hmmm, that's some good rum punch. Care for one?” And he took off his sunglasses and looked at her. “Even if you are not yet of age, as they say, as captain of this vessel,” he looked around him, “I hereby declare that you are of legal drinking age while onboard!”

Sandy was in form-fitting faded jeans and a slightly too tight cotton pullover that displayed any time she was excited. Or cold. Right at that moment she wasn't cold, but.... She hated being seen in public like that but by the time Mr. Billings found her there was no time to go home to change. “Yes indeed. You're the finest example of womanhood that I've seen in a long time.” And he smacked his lips.

“Pig!” muttered Sandy through gritted teeth in

what she thought was too low a tone to be heard.

“Oh, excuse me... have I offended you, Miss Swift?” He was enjoying the sudden look of anger on her face. “I’m sorry. Please,” he remarked solemnly, “let me make you one of these drinks. They’re only pineapple and pomegranate juices with a dash of rum and a little maraschino cherry syrup. Perhaps a little girlie for some men’s tastes, but it is one for my favorites. Please sit,” and he pointed to chairs that were arranged under the canvas desk awning. They sat down and Sandra was glad to put her demonstration items on the table.

What am I doing here? That man is a pig. Sandra thought to herself as she sat there. How far will I go to save the Company? That far? She glanced at his incredible chest. Yeah. Perhaps...

She felt a chasm opening up in front of her, and another one behind. Did she dare step forward or should turn around and run? If she ran, the company would be certain to die. But, if she remained, what would she have to do to save it?

Mr. Samson hummed to himself as he made her drink. He came back and placed it on the table in front of Sandy. “It isn’t too strong,” he assured her.” He steepled his fingertips in front of his mouth and said, “Now, down to business. You need a million bucks to try to save the company and I have a million bucks. That’s basically it, right?” And he smiled behind his fingers while

looking at Sandra.”

“Yes, Mr. Samson,” she replied, then switched to a rehearsed line of conversation. “We're willing to pay the going rate for the loan. We would like it to be non-accruing for the first thirty days and then simple, not compounded, interest for a period of twelve additional months. No penalties for missing a payment and anything not paid at the end of the term to be paid as a balloon payment with an additional one percent interest on that balance, or... you get to marry the daughter of the majority shareholder.”

“Very nice recitation, Miss Swift. But I was thinking of something just a little different. Call it prepaid interest if you will. How about a weekend in Las Vegas?”

Sandra stood up and tried to throw her drink in his face. It might have been more effective had she not already drunk the contents and poured the excess ice over the side of the boat. The straw and paper umbrella that fluttered past his head almost took him by surprise.

“How dare you!” exclaimed Sandra giving a stomp of her right foot that only served to make her chest jiggle. She could hear Mr. “Pig” Samson laughing at her as she ran down the gangplank and up the marina walkway.

“Don't worry Mr. Billings,” laughed Samson as he stood up. “I just needed to see if she had scruples. She has those in spades. I'll give her the

money and at better terms than she recited. I like a woman with spunk. She'll do all right in this world. I only hope she'll let me be there for her."

Sandy, Tommy and Mr. Avery walked into the bank a few minutes before noon, three persons drained of hope and emotion. They knew the game was over, but they were determined to see it through to the very bitter end. Mr. Billings met them at the door and took them to his office. After he sat them down, he excused himself for a moment. When the door reopened, there stood Mr. Samson with a bright smile on his face. A briefcase-toting stranger, and Mr. Billings, followed him in.

"What is he doing here?" Sandy said sourly as she jumped to her feet. She was shaking with anger. As with the foot stomping, it did strange things to her anatomy. Mr. Samson's smile got even brighter.

"Please Sandra, sit down," the banker implored her. "It's not what you think. Please give me a chance to explain." The possibility that she would walk out of the meeting was clear to see on his face.

"Okay, Mr. Billings, for old times' sake. But, for your sake this better be good." She sat back down and crossed her arms over her chest, thus blocking Mr. Samson's view.

“I would like to apologize for the Board meeting. I was totally taken by surprise there. And, as to what happened this morning, I was not a part to any of it.” He starred daggers at Mr. Samson. “Believe me, I don't do business that way! Now to why Mr. Samson is here. This bank is controlled by the board of trustees you were subjected to the other evening. The controlling faction is ruled by Mr. A. Flagger, the fourth. Everyone in this room, except for your British friend here, should know how he makes no bones about his hatred of the Swifts. It began way back when that unspeakable thing happened to his great-grandfather, Andy Flagger. When he died in prison the whole Flagger family swore revenge on you Swifts.”

“What terrible thing?” Tommy asked.

“Shhhh,” Sandy replied. “It is *unspeakable!*”

Billing continued. “Well, with your last ditch attempt to save the company in front of the Board, A. Flagger thought his ship had come in. He could ruin you by withholding the Bank's money. He and his toadies stopped the bank from giving you the loan you needed. If that means the demise of the Swift Construction Company, he will have accomplished what no other Flagger has ever done.”

“He's a right bastard!” angrily declared Mr. Avery pounding one of his very large fists so hard down onto the desk that the entire corner cracked. Mr. Billings rolled his eyes and sadly shook his

head. "It *was* priceless," he said before returning to the matter at hand. "Well, Mr. A. Flagger has met his match!" He pointed to Mr. Samson who waived at them all from his chair on the other end of the desk.

Introductions for Tommy and Mr. Avery were quickly made.

"I will do whatever it takes to make your family business a success once again, Sandra," Mr. Samson assured them. "Your family has been part of this community for a hundred years. You've always done the right things for the community. Not like generations of Flaggers who steal pennies from blind men and shortchange prostitutes. I ran across a couple of the Flaggers in my side business dealing in the stock market. I don't like the way any of them do business. Bribery, influence pedaling, and most probably money laundering for Colombian drug cartels. They're all rotten, but the worst of them is A. Flagger. Through insider trading they cost me tens of millions of dollars a few years ago. I know it, but I can't prove it. That was a bad mistake on their part. I don't just believe in an eye for an eye, I believe in an eye, pancreas, gall bladder, half a liver and one lung lobe for an eye!"

"Goodness. Um... are you some kind of underworld boss or international gangster?" Tommy asked.

"Hah! No, I am Hazard Samson, financier and

son of Atlas Samson, shipping magnate and grandson of Hercules Samson one time owner of all of Crete who was son to Mephistopheles Samson the great naval warrior. Before that, it was Hermie Samson, sheep butcher. I'll provide the funding to keep your company open. If the Swifts don't fail, then A. Flagger does. That's enough to satisfy me. It will start a domino effect in all the Flagger holdings, and I want to be there to see that justice is done for all the people the A. Flaggers of this world have hurt. What do you say?"

Mr. Billings sat down and had a sip of water. "Remember, Sandra, that A. Flagger is a bastard. He deserves as much pain and financial ruin as Mr. Samson can heap on him." This matter of the Flaggers was personal to him as well. A. Flagger had hurt him in some way in the past and he wanted to be part of the downfall.

Sandy looked at her two companions. They both shrugged their shoulders.

"What do I have to do?" asked Sandra.

"You personally. Nothing other than signing these papers," answered Mr. Samson, "and then accepting my invitation to dinner sometime in the next few days. No strings attached and nothing to do with my helping you."

Sandy blushed slightly and gave him an almost imperceptible nod.

"Lovely! The bank turns your loans over to me

as soon as you sign. I pay them off immediately costing the bank almost one hundred thousand dollars in lost interest which will be registered straight up the ladder and to A. Flagger. It will burn him making for a good start to this enterprise. I also place a million dollars in your account to pay for your ongoing work on this new invention. It's that simple." His smile spoke of some kind of secret. And Sandy wasn't sure that it was good for them all, or meant just for her. She shivered.

"What happens if we fail?" asked Tommy, who knew not of this A. Flagger.

He answered simply. "I keep everything. I will own Swift Constructing Company lock, stock and barrel. And, if you no longer use or keep barrels, I will buy you a train car load and then take those as well." And he laughed at his own joke. "No matter what, A. Flagger doesn't get your company and you're no worse off than today. My rates for the combined loans is unbelievable. Three years and you don't start paying it back for six months and then only at one percent. Simple, not compound as Sandra negotiated for earlier."

They were all astounded.

"Three years and only one percent? What's the catch?" demanded Mr. Avery. He balled his hands and placed his huge fists on the conference table.

Mr. Samson looked down at them and blinked. Twice. "Look, I'm not losing anything over this. If it works I'll likely end up be picking up Flagger's

losses. I promised to help the people he sucked into his schemes and I intend to stand by that. I'll sign papers over to you that commit me to everything I've said and offered, so you can keep me honest. The one stipulation is that you don't keep them in a bank. He has too many connections around town and my guess is they will simply disappear.”

He made a ‘poof’ motion with his hands. And, not in a homosexual way. More of a mini-explosion of smoke and then nothing left on the little stand when it clears away, way.

“Whether you start to pay me back and fail to continue to pay, or fail right off, or make it almost to the final payment and then go belly up, or make a few payments and miss a few before getting back to paying me, or gamble it all away on Lotto tickets, I lose nothing. Your property is worth millions as an industrial site or even as a planned community with its own airport. I know it’s a lot to decide on, so take an hour or so. Heck, take until tomorrow. Call me at my yacht.” He handed Sandra a card. “If you call, or especially if you drop by, let’s say at around nine tonight—casual beachwear for dinner and perhaps a two-piece for a swim later on if you are so inclined—we both win. If you don't, oh well. I’m still having a lobster tail and filet mignon served with drawn butter and a béarnaise sauce accompanied by a bottle of a cheeky little Merlot from out in Oregon and perhaps poached pears in a port wine reduction for

dessert. I'll get even with them some other way." He got up, handed them a set of papers his aide took from the briefcase and, with his aide at his side, left.

Mr. Avery went out the door after him. A minute later, he was back.

"Uncle Hank, have you got any idea what your sudden disappearance did to us? Why did you dart out like that?" asked Sandra.

"Had to go really bad," and he sat himself back down and became very interested in the recent crack on the desktop.

"Well, we can't decide this here. Let's go home." Nodding their agreement, they got up, thanked Mr. Billings, and left.

"You don't have to do it Sandy," said Mr. Avery. He looked around the room they were in. They had come back to the loft in the Assembly building. It had become their unofficial headquarters. He would miss it if they didn't take the deal.

"I have to, Uncle hank," Sandy replied.

"No, Sandy, you don't have to go to dinner at his boat tonight," Tommy admonished her. "I know you're going to sign those papers. Heck. I would if I were you. But, you don't have to give in to the man and let yourself be alone onboard his fabulous and very expensive yacht that god only

know how it got into Lake Copeland in the first place, but it is here and you will be alone with him and whatever he has planned.”

“I don't have any choice if I'm going to try to get him interested enough in me to ask me to be his steady girl. Besides, I adore lobster with drawn butter and petite fillet mignon with béarnaise sauce and especially poached pears with port wine reduction for dessert. I wish Dad was here,” and she sighed. “He thinks I'm not interested in men. Hah!”

“Well he's not, and if he were we wouldn't be in this mess and you wouldn't be about to go off to a very rich man's yacht to have lobster with drawn butter and petite fillet mignon with béarnaise sauce and especially poached pears with port wine reduction for dessert,” Mr. Avery stated. “Got a good retort for that?”

She had none.

“Sandy,” Tommy spoke up, “I've only been here for five days, but it's been the worst and best five days of my life. If this is the way the Swifts run their lives, it's a wonder that any one of you have survived this long! But I love it. You and Mr. Avery mean the world to me now. I don't want to lose any of this. So, be very careful on Mr. Samson's fabulously expensive yacht having lobster with drawn butter and petite fillet mignon with béarnaise sauce for dinner, and especially poached pears with port wine reduction for

dessert.” She took Sandy's hand and squeezed it.

“It’s a risk alright, and the Swift Construction Company survives on risks. Besides,” Sandy told Tommy with a sly wink, “I’m starving!”

Chapter Five: Production

“Yes, Missy.” Hank Avery steadfastly refused to call Tommy by her name. It was a boy’s name and she was anything but boy like and it gave him a pain in his gut when he thought about it, so he didn’t! “I made a list of the names of the companies we should hire for the sub-assemblies. Except, I don’t know anyone that can make the backing plate of the touch screen. That incredible thin yet strong and flexible material just doesn’t exist. I know of nothing that can be both flexible one moment and then rigid on command.”

“Don’t sweat that. In going back to England tomorrow and will be back in less the two weeks with exactly what we need. I have a friend that’s going to help me with this. She makes stuff like this in her sleep It should be a no brainer, as you Yanks say.”

“Crystals! We don’t need no stinkin’ crystals! They’re too stiff and they break too easily.” He knew that crystals were no answer to their dilemma. “Crystals, my a—“

“Watch the language, Mr. Avery,” Tommy requested. “Resulting to potty mouth when we are angry only shows the world that we aren’t using out words right to express our confusion and anger. Okay?”

“I’ll watch the mouth, Missy, just as lon as you don’t skedaddle back to Old Blimey and cause

Sandy to be disappointed in you for jumping ship like a Limey Rat. Get me?"

"Don't worry I won't disappoint you. My worry is," as she looked over the list, " you don't have a company here to manufacturer the processors."

"Good eye. Well done, you. Instead of telling you, I'm just going to take you to our answer. Let's see Sandy before we go so she knows where we're going. Besides, I want to find out she's doing at rehiring some of the old the people."

They pulled into a small industrial area and a parking lot an hour later. The sign read:

Mr. Avery Electronics Inc. Co. Ltd. GmbH

Tommy was speechless. She sputtered out, "Yours? Have you been double dipping on us, old man?" was all she could come up with.

"No, not exactly, but close." He had the reaction he hoped for. "Don't read a lot into a name. Let's go inside and then you'll see."

"Yo, ancient father unit. What brings you here?" inquired a younger version of Mr. Avery. He was the same height, with large shoulders and even larger hands. "Got it!" He answered himself. "You still don't trust your own flesh and blood to run the company you officially gave up more than a half dozen years ago, even though you kept partial ownership and sit on the Board of Directors. Have I got it?" With a laugh he said. "And, who is this incredibly zoftig young lady?"

“Look her in the eyes, boy! Just because of that remark, I'm not going to tell you who she is! Anyway, you'll try to steal her from me and I'll have to become a miserable old man again.”

“Again? Ha! You never stopped being one! That's why mom got out when she could.” And at that he turned away from his father and concentrated his attention on Tommy.

“So, you're Thomasina Swift? I'm Hank Avery Jr., in case you haven't figured it out. That crack about mom is a little unfair given that she died seven years ago, but a little anger on pop's part keeps him on his toes and off of mine. Let me take you on a two cent tour, and I'll even waive the entry fee for you.” He showed her around till they came to a big window where two men were working with lasers in total body suitst. “We can't go in there, it's a sealed room. I'm sure you know that, Thomasina.”

“Oh, yes. I've spent more hours in just such a room than you've probably had hot dinners since your mother passed away,” was her reply.

“Touché! Your FPGA chip is fantastic!” Hank Jr's eyes were ostensibly looking at the men in the sealed room but Tommy could tell that he was short-focssing on her reflection. It made her smile ever so slightly. “I've never worked with one before. But a seven-layer programmable chip with one point two million transistors set up to feed over twenty sixteen core processors that each

perform different tasks on their own and with that speed! Over twenty times faster than the normal chip and you can arrange it into any shape you want. Love the circular shape you've chosen. I'd love to own the rights to that!"

Tommy smiled, turning to him, and said, "I own the patent on that chip; designing that was my research paper. You get to own what you make at the university if you help pay for it. I put out one thousand pounds, Sterling, for my lab time. So far I've made a cool half million back and do not intend to let anyone else in on the profits. However, if you carry this off I'll guarantee you'll be the sole manufacturer of this chip and will be allowed to keep twenty-two percent of the profits from it. I want to market it. The only thing is, it will go out exclusively in Swift Construction Company products for the first three years. See out electronics manager, a Mister H. Avery I believe, for options on bidding for projects and products."

That'll teach him to tease his father about the death of the man's wife! she thought.

Both Hank Jr. and Sr. were surprised at this. They both imagined that it would be a one time deal. The two men were so happy that the whole issue with making light of the death of Mrs. Avery was forgotten.

Mr. Avery and Tommy left a short time later, with Tommy asking, "Are all the companies you've selected like your son's? Small and

independent? Owned by various of your offspring?”

“Nah! Well, when I say ‘Nah’ I mean about that last part. He’s my only kid. But, yes to the first part. I like working with small and hungry companies. You can get a lot from a hungry company where you might just get pushback from a big one!” he told her with a twinkle in his eyes.

A fortnight later, as they say across the pond, Tommy returned from England. She and Sandy were sitting in the office of the Administration building looking over the advertising campaign Sandy put together while she was gone.

“Blimey!” she told her younger cousin. “For an American girl with no formal training in either electronics or advertising. This isn’t bad by half as much as I thought it might be. Nice.”

“Well... thanks, I guess? Anyway, welcome home!”

Home, Tommy thought. *To think I already consider this place my home*. She shook her head with amazement.

Sandra left Tommy to look over the campaign more carefully and she returned to her desk full of paperwork. Right now, she was the accountant, payroll manager, the person running the advertising department, as well as working with a skinny fifteen year old nerd on the company website. She had already had one run in with him

when he attempted to surreptitiously brush the back of his hand against her right breast. A little slap and a cold glass of water in the kid's lap had set him straight. Since then, it had been noting but business.

Only a few hundred thousand dollars were left in the account, but all bills were paid and supplies to make the first 1,000 units had been received. They still owed Mr. Samson over a million dollars, but at least there was light at the end of the tunnel.

“So, Tommy, half-pence for them?” she asked leaning back in her chair.

“Pardon?”

“Half-pence for them. Your ideas. Thoughts. I'll pay you a half penny for your thoughts on those ads.”

“What a silly thing to say, Sandy. My thoughts on any matter are worth at least a full Guinea. And, that's just about five cents in your decimalized currency. Half-pence, indeed! Cheapskate!”

Sandy ignored the snide comments.

“Scope out the electronics shows happening between now and Christmas. We should go to them. Also, see if we can get a small space at the CES in Las Vegas in January.”

Sandy nodded. “Right. I forgot about them. And thanks for secretly creating the new battery. I don't know how you did it, but it's what we need. That super flat battery from Japan might be the

best on the market today, but it didn't give us half the power we need. The screen's drive motors drain too much energy from the battery to run the tablet for long."

"Oh, it was nothing," said Tommy. "I have been sitting on that carbon nano-tube technology with crystal matrix for over a year. My factory back home can make it in sheets at a rate of about fifteen feet a minute. Just needs to be cut to size and sealed. The polymer membrane that seals each end allows the nano-tubes to soaked up the electrons like little straws and keeps it in. I just poke a minute wire in at each end and out comes electricity. It worked the first time out." She was very satisfied at how that had worked.

"You might think it's a little thing, Tommy, but that new battery lasts five times longer than the polymer-membrane Japanese battery. Oh, and that key chain fob power source you brought back? It's over the top. A six-hour rechargeable external battier with flip-out wall plug built right in. Wonderful. And, if they really cost as little as you say, we'll include it with every unit we sell as a bonus. If that doesn't sell the bracelet, nothing will."

"I would suggest making it a free offer for the first, oh, ten thousand units. After that, make it a mail-in order for \$10.00 plus postage and handling of about \$2.95. We'll still make a five-dollar bill from each one. If we sell a hundred thousand of them, that's a profit on the fobs alone of four

hundred fifty thousand dollars. On top of the profits from the bracelets at roughly \$75.00 each bringing in seven million pre hundred thousand units. By this time next year you could be driving around in that little Lamborghini you told me you've had your eye on."

"I like it," Sandy told Tommy. "Plus, Uncle Hank says that the fob idea can be adopted to fit other electronic devices. The battery and the fob add two more products to our assembly line. If we can't make it with these products, I'll eat my shirt!"

"You do that and you'll have every man in Shopton and the entire county lining up to watch!" Tommy teased her. "Plus, statistically about eleven percent of all the women."

"When do we get the back plates and batteries?" Sandy asked changing the subject.

"We'll get the first shipment in two days and then a shipment every day after that till we yell 'Stop.' It's a little costly, so when we can, we should switch over to cargo rate shipping or start our own assembly line for them here. We can then sell the other batteries in England and have a dual market place. In fact, we can sell them everywhere in Europe except France. I refuse to change all the labeling and documentation for the French and French-Canadian markets. Snotty cheese eating surrender monkeys! Anyway, we'll need to have a back up supply on hand of at least four weeks

before we switch to cargo shipments.”

“Sounds like a plan. Work it out with Uncle Hank when you can.”

“No problem. I'm going to my motel. I need a long, hot, soapy shower, a good arm and leg shave, and I think I can sleep for a week after that. Call me if you have to.”

She left leaving Sandy slightly dazed and trying to erase the image that had sprung into her mind.

Two days later Tommy and Mr. Avery were building test units by hand in the loft. Sandy was watching them from a tall stool. Several fobs were charging on the bench.

“Guys, if this doesn't work, you're going to have to shoot me. I'm as nervous as heck!” She got up for the fifth time and paced the floor, swigging her arms around trying to find something to do with them. “Hey. Is it possible to make the fobs so they recharge without plugging in? I mean, like my iPod and that charging mat I bought?”

“Just give Missy and me a few more seconds with this version before you go all ‘Can we this?’ and ‘Can we that?’ There... it's done. Tommy, you make the first call.” He held another bracelet in his hand so he could answer the call.

“Sorry, Mr. Avery,” Tommy replied with a laugh. “In all the time we've spent on this project we never arranged to have cellular service here for testing. Oops! Sandy and I decided to not have them activated to a specific network so that

whatever network the buyer has, they can continue to use it on that We're going to have to find a way to activate them first.”

“Ha!” shouted Sandy. “Shows how well you pay attention when you two have your noses glued together over that bench!” She stomped over to the door. “Make the first call on each one to ‘0-7-7-7-3-3’ to use the temporary activation tower,” and she swept out of the room.

Tommy and Mr. Avery were left standing there slack-jawed as they heard her tromp down the stairs accompanied by peals of her own laughter.

The next day they began production.

“Sandy, you push the button. Time's wasting,” yelled Uncle Hank from the middle of the assembly line where he was standing.

Tommy was at the other end of the line ready to test the end product. “Hurry up, blondie!”

As Sandy pushed the button, the production figures ran through her mind. Four minutes later Tommy grabbed the first one off the line and plugged it into the test rack.

Five green lights on the rack lit in succession.

“Hot damn! We've done it!” she yelled as she jumped up and down and all around... to the delight of the three men standing nearby.

Chapter Six: Melding of Minds

Two days later Sandra found her father in her office, sitting in the visitor's chair. He looked terrible. Sandy tried not to notice.

“Daddy!” she exclaimed. “Great to see you here.”

Since the day Tommy arrived he had continued to show no interest in what was going on at company. Sandra ran to him and gave him a hug and a kiss. She sat on the edge of the desk to be near him.

“What can I show you, Dad? Would you like to look at the bracelet?” She held out her arm to show him hers.

“No, Sandra, I just wanted to tell you that the Company is all yours. I’m out of here. I’m toast. Slap a thermometer in me and call me done.” His face was cold and hard.

“No, Daddy! You can't. I won't allow it. You've drawn salary over the past twenty eight months and only provided about three total months of participation. You must either stay and work off that money or pay it back. Weekly would be best but monthly terms can be arranged if necessary.” She slipped off the desk and grabbed his left hand.

“I’m kidding, Daddy,” she said as she drew his hand up to her face. Kissing his finger she told him, “You have so much more you can do here.

You have to stay.”

“You can't stop me,” was his reply, but he would not look at her. He also did not take back his hand for over a minute. “You have to let me go,” he told her.

“No, I can't. Not emotionally at least. I can't stop you from heading out that door, but I won't take your name off anything. No the company roster, not the ownership documents, not this office and not even the really handy parking spot that stays in the shade most days so your car doesn't get too hot to comfortably drive. I can be just as stubborn as you!” She stood back and glared at him.

“Have you forgotten the loss of your mother and brother?” he retorted.

“Father!” she sobbed with tears in her eyes, her voice rising as she spoke. “For starters, if you think I've forgotten them, you're wrong! I loved them. I still do! Secondly, I don't see what calling up their ghosts right at this minute accomplishes. In fact, it is kind of a cheap shot, if you ask me. All the problems you feel you have are yours, not theirs. It's almost as if you are using them as an excuse. Shame, shame, shame on you, Mister Gloomy!” She was shouting so loud that she was being heard throughout the building.

“All I have done here since that day is to try to keep their memory alive. Mother was so proud of what you rebuilt here after the mishandling of

things by your father. Tom wanted to go to the stars and wanted to bring the Swift Construction Company with him and he was willing to take the reins from your hands so that it could all work, even though he hated the paperwork. They're both dead. I can't let their pride in this company and their dreams for it die with them. You rebuffed my attempts to take some of the burden off your shoulders by telling me that it isn't a woman's job... and I took that from you. Now, you want to just dump it on me like a sack of rotting fish so you can go off and die? Well, I will take over because I refuse to let this company die, too!" And with that said she ran out of the room and left the building.

Tommy and Sandy sat close to each other on a bench not far from where Tommy had first read Tom's diary. Tommy had followed the distraught girl out of the building and had handed her the spare helmet she now kept behind the front desk. A short ride had brought them near to the lake where they huddled under a blanket she found in her saddlebag.

Sandy finally stopped crying twenty minutes later. She was exhausted and rested her head on Tommy's chest. After all she had done, yet it still was not enough to bring her father's spirits back to life.

"Sandy, believe me. You did nothing wrong!"

Tommy told her stroking Sandy's hair gently. "Your father is not thinking straight. He knows you loved your mother and Tom. And, you can be thankful he doesn't know about hangar number five, three summers ago and a certain blond-headed young man... Anyway," she added feeling Sandy stiffen in her embrace. "I believe that you have done something he could not bring himself to do. You kept on living! You refused to curl up and die. Subconsciously he may resent you for that. It isn't right and I'm positive he doesn't even know it himself. Somehow he feels responsible for their deaths. Why? I don't know."

"I do." Sandy replied. "He was supposed to go with them. Work on a new jet engine was more important to him. That engine saved his life, but now he has what they call Survivor's Guilt. He feels he should have died with them. Or worse, he thinks he could have saved them!" A sob came from deep within her. She had no tears left, just despair.

"The stupid thing is that his reaction time is noticeably slower than mothers so nobody believes for a moment that he could have avoided the accident. If he had been there, I would have been an orphan. Which is how I feel right now." She wiggled a little and got one arm around Tommy's back and hugged her.

"He blames himself so much. He thinks I don't know this. I don't care. He's all I have left, and I

love him, Tommy. He's my daddy.” She started sobbing again and Tommy held her for another minute.

“Uh, Sandy? That’s my boo— well, you’re stroking your fingers on some place I’d rather you didn’t right now, that’s all.”

Sandy rearranged herself. “Sorry, Tommy.”

“No problem. So, back to your father. You just have to tell him that you know the guilt he must be feeling and that you *don't care*. That you *love him*. Tell him you will never stop loving him, no matter what. That he probably needs to go into therapy for a few months to work out all of his issues, And, you need to hide his sherry bottles. Not because I’m afraid of him hitting the sauce, but because that is truly vile sherry! I’ll buy him some good stuff next time I go to England!”

For the first time in an hour Sandy chuckled. “I know it’s pretty bad. You should have seen your face that day I poured you a glass.”

“You didn’t have to pour that second one, you know. And, Sandy, that slogan of your company, ‘Where the future is now,’ has a lot of meaning for you. For us. There is no future without a now... no now without letting go of the past. Not forgetting it, just releasing it. We’ll slap it out of him, Sandy. We have to. We’re Swift girls!”