

Thomasina Swift and Her PHARC Jet

*Adventure Two in the
Awesome New Series!*

BY
Leo L. Leo II

Cover Art by THud

Made in The United States on America

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

Thomasina Swift and Her Arc Jet

Also in this series:

Thomasina Swift” Forever (and a bit) More

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 and Her PHARC Jet

By Leo L. Leo

Now that Thomasina Swift has saved the day at the Swift Construction Company, what does that leave for her to do?

As it turns out, plenty! It all begins with a metaphorical monkey wrench in the works of an airplane and spirals, loops and races around her.

Finding a Bud-ding love is just one small part of her latest adventure. She also is in a race against the one man she isn't certain she wants to beat, in an effort to create an incredible new jet engine.

Is Tommy capable of handling both a personal as well as a corporate life?

Dedication

This book is dedicated to people who
dream the dream, walk the walk and talk the talk.

Again, my thanks to my wife whom I assured that it would all be over “as soon as I finish this little story.” That was story number one and now it appears there will be at least five. Hope she stays with me through all this!

I also say continued thanks to T. Edward Fox. He ought to have other things to do on his own Tom Swift series of novels, his Anne Swift series of novellas, his ongoing Invention short stories and all those character pieces he seems to love to do. Why he seeks to fiddle with my perfectly good stories like this, I can’t begin to fathom!

Thomasina: The Next Story

FOREWORD

Tommy Swift is no Tom Swift. Neither is she a Damon Swift, a Tom Swift, Jr., a Tom Swift III or so on. She is, as the saying goes, her own person.

And, she is quite a woman. She brings an incredible level of knowledge and scientific know-how to Shopton when she arrives, and the surprises just keep on coming.

Lets' recap a little: she just came up with a combination wristwatch and touch tablet computer that Steve Jobs might have wet himself over, practically single-handedly pulling the entire Swift organization back fro the brink and getting them on track to take their place in the world. All in story #1.

And, she has done this despite being English.

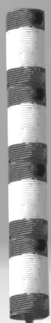
Wow!

Color me impressed, and I'm the one who discovered her in the first place!

Leo L. Leo II

A SWIFT ENTERPRISES SAGA

Thomasina Swift and Her PHARC Jet



By Leo L. Leo III

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Prologue, Part Two: Thomasina Swift and Her PHARC Jet

The same three Tom Swifts (see book 1) were in the meeting room back at Tom's restaurant. The food wasn't the drawing point, although the robot Aristotle did a good job. It was more that this 'All Toms Club' just felt right to them somehow. Two of them sat playing liars pinochle, but the third was fiddling with a weird motorcycle wheel-like contraption. It was a three-foot high, self-balancing, mono-wheeled robotic probe and sensor array. Two radar antenna disks arched up over the top of the wheel and sweep around and around. Tom Jr. had added a small doll of a man wearing a tiny cowboy hat sitting in a small saddle to the middle of it, giving it a surreal appearance.

The two LED lights that blinked where the doll's eyes should be made it even eerier!

Tom Jr. looked with satisfaction at his invention and said to the others, "It's really a nice bit of kit, even if I do brag about it myself. If it detects a Negative Zone, it will make one heck of a racket. If the zone is heading away or closing up, it will fire a drone into it. The drone will boomerang back with the location it arrive at out there in the vast multi-universe."

“What if it’s incoming?” asked T-3.

“It still makes an awful racket, but it also takes a really neat high-definition photograph of whatever or whoever is coming through. If it is malevolent, at least the people who come to investigate our deaths will be able to see what hit us!” He was about to mention that it would be in ‘living color,’ except that might be in bad taste. “I’ll leave it here... on this desk... guys?”

The other Toms still had not looked up. They both felt that Tom Jr., known to them as Little Tom or LT, was a braggart and usually over played the capabilities of his inventions.

LT took out four fob receivers from his pocket and slapped them on the table disrupting their card game. Each had a name on it so it would go to the right Tom.

“I’ll leave the other two warning devices here so that TSL and T-5 can pick them up at their convenience. Each one has a quantum radio in it that can keep us all in contact.” He stood there waiting for the inevitable question.

T-4 looked at LT and shook his head. “LT, even *you* can’t make a quantum radio go to more than one location! *Especially* you!” T-3 and T-4 had a good laugh at that. “How did you do it?”

“The way that made sense. The remote on the table has five quantum radios built in and auto-

transfers to any or all fob radios as needed. So, while I as busting butt, did you guys come up with anything?"

T-3 sat back in his chair, raised his arms up and placed his hands behind his head, interlocking his fingers and twisting them to make them all crack in rapid succession. It made others wince and he loved the effect.

"Well," he said, "I haven't been sitting on my thumbs despite what rumors you might hear from time to time. I've been equipping the *Exedra*, my space ship, with the same devices that you made but made from shinier materials and probably a lot better. I can probe a whole solar system at once. The only thing is that if I'm behind the zone portal there's no way to get in front of it in time and send a probe into it."

LT smirked. "Figures!"

They looked at T-4 who shook his head and said, "I didn't even try, but I have something that's better!" He reached down and picked up a blue folder. "It's the latest Thomasina Swift story. I snuck into her publisher's offices and downloaded a copy from his PC. Idiot! If he was using a Macintosh we'd be out of luck getting a look at these ahead of time!"

Chapter One: “Daddy’s Back!”

Tommy Swift parked her motorcycle next to a white sports car in the Administration parking lot at the Swift Construction Company. Sandy Swift, the owner of the little car, was leaning against the passenger side, smiling to herself.

Tommy walked over to her and poked a finger into Sandy’s upper sternum demanding, “What are you so smug about? And, what’s all that grinding metal against metal, battle of the spastic robots noise?”

“That noise is delicious. I could eat it all day,” Sandy replied and she continued to smile and listen.

“You’ve been smoking something... it’s awful. I wish it would stop.” She got her wish when the sound increased to a higher pitch and then exploded with a *kaboom!* Smoke billowed into the sky from the far end of the complex.

“Sandy, call 9-1-1!” and Tommy was sprinting for her car to get in. She turned to look at her blond cousin in time to see Sandy standing there, definitely not phoning for help, and still smiling.

She said, “Winner, winner, chicken dinner. It took ten minutes before it ruptured that time.

Slow down and smell the coffee, Tommy, it's only daddy," and she grabbed Tommy and spun her around and around, laughing all the time.

Tommy yanked her hands back sending Sandy stumbling backward into the side of her little white car. "Oh, poot! Now I'm going to have a black and blue butt!" she shouted, before breaking out in a huge smile. "Tommy! It's daddy, he's back!"

"What about his back?" Tommy asked.

"No, you duff Brit. He... is... back! By god, Thomasina Swift, you have to get those ears syringed out. Sometimes I think you're going deaf."

"Death? Who died? Your father?" Tommy asked feigning horror.

Sandy laughed at her cousin, glad to see her making jokes. "As I said, it is daddy and he is back at the company and he is back doing experiments and he is back getting much better results than he did when he stopped doing them back after Tom and mother died in that terrible big-rig accident."

"Jump back, Sandy. What do you mean it's your father?" Tommy asked looking into her face for a reason for her antics.

"Get into the car and I'll explain." Sandy drove onto the tarmac taxiway that bisected the

Swift Construction Company's property, and headed to the far end where wisps of smoke continued to rise into the blue sky. She turned right onto the runway that ran along the back fence and headed toward the smoke.

“Daddy put all his experiments away right after the funerals. The one he was working on when they died is what has been making that noise. It was a new type of jet engine but with some sort of difference he only discussed with Tom. What's different, I don't know, but the three previous versions all exploded after a few minutes running.” She parked the car in front of a blockhouse building and, taking her older English cousin's hand in hers, led Tommy around it to the back.

Fifty feet behind the blockhouse was a pit that looked like an empty swimming pool except that a long ramp came out of one side. It was lined with six feet of concrete to shore up the sides and featured a large hole at one end that will be discussed later on No peeking, although it's purpose is revealed on page 98. A forklift stood at the bottom of the ramp with a wooden box on its forks. The test stand in the middle of the pit held the twisted wreck of the engine that had just gone boom.

Damon Swift—Sandy's father and Tommy's uncle—was hosing down to what was left of the

engine. He had remembered to disconnect the electricity leads this time, something he had found out ‘the hard way’ once several years earlier. He still was bothered by the crack in his coccyx that tended to ache in cold weather or whenever he was forced to sit on concrete. He began tossing twisted scraps into the box when he looked up as Sandy called down to him.

“Way to go, Daddy-o. That was around ten minutes this time. Did you figure out the problem?”

“Hi, Sandy and Tommy. No, other than it’s the same old problem of too much heat. After I pick this place up I’ll get the instrument readings from the blockhouse and study them back at my shed to confirm it.”

“Tommy and I can pick up here; it will be fun to get all hot and sweaty with her. So why don’t you go get the readings and we’ll see you in...” she looked at Tommy and ran her tongue around her lips to moisten them, “...let’s say, about two hours? And, please ask the other employees to not bother us.” Sandy led the bemused Tommy down the ramp into the pit.

“I would like that, thanks,” he told them. As he passed Tommy on his way out he whispered, “Watch it. She just finished reading one of those wacky ‘girl construction workers gone wild’ romance novels. Word to the wise.” Out loud so

Sandy could hear him, he stated, “Tommy, I owe you an apology. I’ve been a total fool for the past two years. When you came to visit us I was still looking to blame anyone and everyone for my wife and son’s deaths. All you wanted to do was be part of this family, and to help. I ignored you. You’re a godsend to us and I can never forgive myself for treating you like— well, for treating you the way I did. Believe me, I want you to stay as long as you like. You *are* a part of this family,” and he reached out to hug her.

Cautiously she stepped forward asking, “Are you certain you want to do this? Remember the reaction you had the first time.”

He stood there, arms raised until she eased herself into his embrace. Tommy with tears in her eyes wrapped her arms around Mr. Swift and hugged him for dear life. After a minute she whispered into his ear.

“Mr. Swift. If I didn’t know better I would swear that you had a length of pipe down the front of your trousers. I mean, that can’t possible be—” She pulled back from him.

“Oops,” he replied. “Involuntary reaction, I assure you.” They separated and he started to walk up the ramp, strangely. He stopped, turned and looked at Sandy.

“Young lady, remind me to tell you how much I would like to hug you, too,” and he went

on up. Sandy grabbed Tommy in a hug of her own.

Finishing the pick-up detail, they went to see Mr. Swift in the blockhouse ten minutes later.

“We’re all set, Daddy. You going back to the shed?”

“Yes, I’ll meet you there.” They nodded and waved goodbye to him. “Thanks for the help, girls!” he called to them.

Sandy and Tommy got to the shed first, leaving her father in the dust. The shed was unlocked and the girls peeked in. Two stories high and half full of crates, it was obvious to both that it hadn’t been cleaned in at least two years. A couple long crates were pulled away from the rest, and one was open and empty.

“What do you think is in that closed one?” asked Tommy.

“Duh! The other engine? As in another engine like the one that went kerpowie! I said daddy had a couple of them.”

“Can we open the closed one?” A closed box was just an invitation to Tommy. She, like most straight women, had an insatiable curiosity gene.

“Why not? Daddy’s going to anyway, might as well get first looks.” The girls went to work with crowbars and nail-pullers and soon had the top wrenched up and off. They wiped dirt from

their hands admiring their work.

“So,” said Sandy with a knowing smile, “satisfied?”

“Yes, I am. At least this one looks like what it is. It’s obviously a hybrid of a rocket and jet. The combustion uses a plasma arc and your dad is feeding in fuel and oxygen through a batch of nozzles around the arc spaced at thirty-six degrees. His problem is that he isn’t running it cool enough. Even a mechanical fool would use a magnetic flux field to contain the plasma and to shape it so that it doesn’t actually touch the metal inside. That, plus he needs to run the chilled fuel in a series of about five hundred small pipes surrounding the outside of inner case so that it keeps things cool.” She snorted and turned away in disgust at the shoddy work she could see. “But, that’s just a guess.”

Sandy’s eyes were glazed over and her completely missed the insults being made about her father.

“Do you think that I didn’t consider all that, Tommy?” asked Mr. Swift as he walked in. He had a hungry twinkle in his eyes Tommy had never seen before. She gasped and swallowed hard.

“Sorry, Mr. Swift, I didn’t want you to hear that. I’m not criticizing your engine, I’m just saying that you really bunged up this one. The

simplicity of the design is great, but the heat is the killer and you've not handled that very well at all," and Tommy's face slowly turned back to normal from its beet red color.

"Don't fear my anger or wrath, Tommy; I want your candor at all times. Science takes no sides—you either do it right... or you get a bollixed job like you have already mentioned."

Tommy told him, "Thank you, sir, for your understanding, and I do think my suggestions might help."

"Good!" he laughed. "Let's have a contest. I'll re-do this one using your new approach and you redesign it any way you like. I'm sure you already did that in your head."

She nodded. "How cheap, sir?"

"Oh, very. I'll use this engine, and you make a blueprint of your proposed engine. Convince me in a one-hour oral presentation, you win."

"And what does she win?" asked Sandy, now taking interest in the conversation.

"Why, having her last name on the company letterhead!" he told them.

Chapter Two: Forced Landing

A week later, Sandy climbed the spiral stairway to the control tower. She was wearing coveralls unbuttoned nearly to her navel. It was two o'clock on a Saturday afternoon and already one hundred degrees outside.

As she peeked up above the floorboards, she could see Tommy standing at the windows with binoculars. "Don't expect me to wash those nasty things," she said wiping her finger across one pane as she stepped over to stand near to Tommy, "and by the looks of this place I don't provide construction services either!"

"And, you don't have to," Tommy laughed, tweaking Sandy's pert nose. "Come over here and tell me what each and every building is throughout the entire complex."

"So, I'm just a map in coveralls?"

"No, you're a curvy map in coveralls unbuttoned down far enough to cause traffic accidents. Button up a little and help compile my list of buildings I'm interested in."

"Okay. Start pointing and I'll give with the info. Why are you looking at buildings?"

"I need my own workshop. And, a little place to lay my head when I work late at night or want

to entertain... well, a place to work. Your father has his so-called shed, even though it is about five thousand square feet, and I would like a place where I can set up my equipment.”

“But, daddy has all that. Can’t you share? As long as you don’t let him hug you too often, you ought to be okay. Right?”

“No. Of course not, Sandy. As nice as he has been since he came back to us, the fact remains that if we work on different things we’ll get into each other’s way. I might prove to distract him, so I need my own place.” Tommy handed Sandy a pair of binoculars, and pointed to a brown hanger to the right of where they stood. “So?”

“That’s the groundskeeper’s building and the blue one next to it is the radio and radar building and mini-tower.”

“What about across the tarmac? Several of those look like airplane hangars and supply sheds.”

“Good guess. You don’t need me!” chuckled Sandy. “Remember that daddy ran this place as a replacement depot for aircraft electronic and such. We needed hangers galore.”

“Right!” exclaimed Tommy. “How about that big red one?”

“Oh-oh! Can you pick them! That was the hangar for the *Silver Cloud*, great granddad’s

dirigible. I might be hanging out of my coveralls, but you're not going to be hanging out over there," quipped Sandy. "That one's off limits. Sort of a family shrine. At least until daddy finds a nice young man to start a flight school and cargo service out of it. As if!"

They both laughed at the absurdity of that.

"Fine. What about those four small buildings right across from us... can I have them or do the Swifts house old family ghosts in those as well?" asked Tommy in mild frustration.

"Simmer, girl! They're all yours. No extra charge for the holes. Want to look at them?"

"Sure, they probably have rats under the floors, too, and that's why no one has a claim on them. For a complex with tons of empty buildings, it's sure hard to get nice one."

As she said this, Tommy swept her arm around at the buildings to emphasize her point. She stopped as she spotted a speck in the sky and raised her binoculars to see what it might be.

"Damn and blast! Sandy, I think that plane is in trouble. Look!" Sandy followed her pointing finger.

"I'm no pilot, but it sure looks wobbly. That isn't right, is it? It's coming from the other side of the lake where an air show is going on. Probably an act. You know, it's typical of men.

They promise you a really good aircraft accident but once they get close they straighten up and fly away!”

“You really are one jaded chick, Sandy Swift. It’s coming this way and if you listen rather than talk, you can hear the engine and it doesn’t sound good.” Tommy was still straining to see the plane better. “Do you let pilots know there’s a airstrip here? Could he know?”

“I doubt it; since we closed the tower a year ago we’re no longer listed on the air charts as a usable airfield.”

“We’ve got to do something! Get me a flare gun.” Tommy rushed into the tower.

Sandy called in from the catwalk, “Daddy doesn’t believe in guns.”

“No!” shouted Tommy coming back to the door. “Flare gun. Shoots bright flares up into the sky? Must have one by law? Come on!!”

“Oh! A fireworks pistol. Is that what you mean?” and together they frantically started to search through all the empty drawers and cabinets. At last Tommy found what she wanted.

She rushed back outside and shot one of the three flares she had located into the air. She looked for a result... Nothing! The second flare went into wobbling the sky... It fizzled out and dropped to the ground setting a small fire in a

pile of brush. She carefully checked over the last flair. It looked to be in fine shape so she loaded it and fired it into the air, crossing her fingers.

“Yes!” she shouted. “That’s what I’m talkin’ about! Look!” she raised her binoculars just in time to see the plane waggled it wings back and forth and turn toward them.

When it was within a quarter mile, the sputtering engine went silent, and the plane took a nosedive. The pilot recovered quickly and did a rollercoaster path to the far end of the main runway. With a loud bang it hit the ground, bounced twice and rolled to a stop half way down the strip.

“Let’s go, Sandy! He may be cute... I mean he may be hurt,” Tommy yelled over her shoulder as she bounded down the stairs and from the Administration building and into Sandy’s car. The two women shot down the runway and squealed to a stop next to the plane. The pilot was out of the plane by then and kicking the left tire in anger.

The girls ran up to him and Tommy asked, “Are you all right? Do you need medical attention? Are you married?”

Only then did the pilot turn around and notice the two women. Taking them both in his jaw went slack. “Son of a bit—“ he started to

swear but then got tongue-tied.

“Eyes up, mister whoever you are pilot guy,” Sandy told him on seeing where his attention was focused. “You dead or dying?”

“No, no, I’m fine,” he looked from Tommy to Sandy and back to Tommy. “Just get me a gun, or a huge metal grinder to shred this piece of junk,” he addressed Tommy in particular.

“What’s the mater with the crate?” Tommy asked in her best English upper crust accent.

“It’s a piece of... um, it has many and varied problems, miss. If it isn’t the fuel pump it’s the cylinder head. If not that, then it is a bad plug, and so on and so forth All it has been to me this past several months is a flying pile of troubles. Any chance of borrowing a map and a phone?”

As she handed the pilot her phone bracelet, Tommy asked, “Are you from the air show?”

“Yes. In fact I was in the middle of a pylon race when this happened.”

“A pylon race?” asked Sandy.

“Two planes race against each other while flying around a set course. We fly only fifty feet off the ground, most of the time, and have to complete three laps without crashing into the other guy and killing ourselves and each other. Lots of guys aren’t successful and that last part.”

“And you call that fun?” asked Sandy as she shook her head ‘no.’ The pilot and Tommy laughed at her. “Why do you need the map?”

“Got to let my ground crew know where to come and get me, Sandy.” He held up one hand to forestall any comments about actual maps being old fashioned.

“I wasn’t going to say anything about using old fashioned maps,” Sandy told him looking at his raised hand. “Hey! How did you know my name is Sandy?”

“Uh, haven’t we gone through the I’m X and you’re Y thing, yet?” he asked, scratching his head.

“Nope. Anyway, I’m Sandy Swift and this is Tommy Swift.”

The shook hands all around and the flyer asked, “You sisters?”

“Cousins,” Sandy said.

“Nice. Unmarried?” he asked hopefully, looking pointedly at Tommy.

Tommy spoke up quickly and said. “She can take you to a map and phone, and I’ll stay here and guard.”

“There’s no need to guard, ‘cause no one wants that pile of junk. By the way I’m Bud Kenworth.” He shook both their hands again.

“I have to stay because Sandy’s car only holds two and it’s not my day to be the hood ornament.” Tommy’s eye gleamed with mischief. “Plus, I bet you that I can figure out what’s going on under the cowling in about five minutes.”

Bud snorted. “Fat chance.”

“If I do, then you have to fall madly in love with me and perhaps even marry me in three years time,” she told the startled, dark-haired flyer.

“Well, I was about to tell you that if I had a car you could be my ornament any time, but I think I like your approach better.” He smiled broadly at her.

“Okay, if we are going to call back the whole ornament thing, I would have to respond that I’d rather be seated next to you inside the car, or even perched on your manly lap,” and she blushed.

He liked her quick wit and candor and ability to keep track of a comment even when it had been passed by moments earlier. Showed spunk. Bud liked his women full of spunk. “If, and I mean *if* you get it running and figure out the problem, and as long as it doesn’t lead me into many hours of intrigue and danger involving the ones I love and respect, how about a plane ride

instead?”

Tommy shook her head. “Instead of what?”

Now it was Bud’s turn to shake his head. “I’m not actually certain any more. I think I lost the thread. Let’s just say that you should come by the air show tomorrow and I’ll take you up in the *Abby*, the sweetest bi-plane there is!” The joy in his voice was astounding.

“Can’t wait. Go with Sandy and we’ll talk some more when she brings you back.”

“If I bring him back,” Sandy retorted. “I might want to make a play for this hunk, you know.”

Two minutes later, the car was gone and Tommy had the motor cowl up. She poked around the engine.

“Nope, it’s not the motor,” she said to herself. “Let’s check electrical.” Inside the cockpit she found that the fuses are okay, the ignition wires are all set and the battery showed a full charge. She turned over the engine and it came to life. The engine roared, the radio buzzed with traffic control chatter and the instruments lit up. For a three minutes all was well and then things started to go wonky. The engine was sputtering and the instruments were blinking until everything stopped.

“I wonder what’s causing that?” She ducked

back under the dashboard and felt around with her hands.

“Aha! That’s it.” She reached around the hot computer box for the air vent and found a rag that had been shoved deep into the air intake port. There was no way it could have happened by itself. Someone had sabotage Bud’s plane!

As Sandy and Bud looked over the area map she had in her office she casually mentioned, “Tommy seems to like you, Doug. It would be a pity if you were to be attached, if you know what I mean.

“It’s Bud,” he told her.

“Oh!” Sandy sounded very disappointed. “Well, I’m sure that you and this Bud fellow make a nice couple. I’ll have to let Tommy down easy—“

“No. I’m Bud,” he told her giving her a quizzical look. “What makes you think I’d be interested in her and she in me? After all, I’m only passing through. On my way to Australia, eventually.”

“You’re kidding. How could you *not* be interested in Tommy?” Sandy asked him.

“I don’t follow you.” Bud tried to keep a straight face but a moment later they were both

laughing and slapping their own legs.

Twenty minutes before dusk an eighteen-wheeler drove past the gates of the Construction Company, stopped for a moment, reversed, and then drove onto the grounds. The driver headed past the Administration building and out across the tarmac, pulling a flatbed trailer. He circled around the plane twice and stopped so the back of the truck was next to the front of the plane. A gray hair man of sixty or so climbed out of the truck and limped toward Bud and the girls.

Before he got there Bud called out, "Patches, do you know where Tommy—that's the slightly older blond with the obvious charms over to my left—found this?" and he held out the red rag.

"Well, Boss, it looks like one of my cleaning rags, but I got no idea where she must've found it. I keep 'em all in a bucket back at the tent," he answered in a Texas draw.

"Do you know where you left it?"

"No sir, but if you were listening just now I told you that I keep all my rags in a bucket back at the tent where the racers and mechanics do their work. That one got a number on it?"

Bud looked at both sides. "No."

"Well then, ain't mine. All mine got numbers

beginnin' with 6-4-6-3. That's phone number talk for m-i-n-e. Mine. Get it?" He smiled but could see that Bud was not in a good mood.

"How about Tommy finding it in the air intake port for the control panel?" Bud was having a hard time in controlling his anger.

"Can't be, sir. I cleaned the plane like I always do before a race, and I put all the rags back into the bucket." Patches was almost mumbling by now and was looking nervously at all of them. He knew he was in trouble, and when he got anxious, he couldn't think straight.

"Are you sure, Patches, or you just don't *want* to remember? Maybe you stole this rag and used it hoping that I would blame someone else and not you." Bud's temper was boiling over

"I didn't do it, I swear."

"You're lying!" screamed Bud, losing it a last. "You're back on the booze, and stealing innocent red rags and stuffing them into intake ports to try to make me crash and probably will want to blame my brother for all this, aren't you?"

"No, sir, ain't touched a drop, didn't steal no rag, didn't put anything in your intake port to make you crash! Believe me, Boss," he pleaded.

"You forgot to deny trying to pin this on my brother. Because of that I believe you're lying to

me. You've been acting funny for the past month or so. All those mishaps with the plane this year ever since the middle of May when my brother caught up with us... did you cause them?" he asked in a hard voice.

"No sir, it was... Never mind, you won't believe me," and he was crying in despair.

"Believe you? Why won't I believe you?" he demanded.

"It's... it's JJ," he stammered.

"What!" yelled Bud. "Now you're trying to blame my brother? How dare you! Get out of here, Patches. Get walking before I kick you in that bad leg of yours!" and Bud took a step forward and started pull back his right foot.

Patches looked to the girls for help, but he could only see their bewilderment.

"Boss, please!" he pleaded. "I'm innocent I tell ya! I haven't touched a drop, please! Think. All this problem stuff started in the middle of May right after JJ joined up with us. Come on."

"Get out of here! Now! Start hobbling and don't come back. I'll send your pay to the main post office in Denver, so you're going to have to find a way to get there if you want that money. After that you're on your own." Bud walked off into the gathering darkness.

Tommy looked at Patches and then at Sandy. She spread her hands out in hopelessness and ran after Bud. When Tommy reached him she grabbed his arm and stopped him. She drew him close to her and held him for a moment. She could feel him shaking with anger. Then, she could feel him slowly move in time to some internal music. Soon, they were slow dancing.

“Bud,” she whispered hotly in his ear, “is there anything I can do to help?” He shook his head no and continued to move. She had stopped so it soon became a case of him rubbing up against her. She didn’t mind it but this wasn’t the time. “Please, let me help.”

He answered her. “I’ve known Patches all my adult life and he never lied to me before. But why blame my brother? I know JJ is a pain at times and a little troublesome but he’s a good kid. He’s only seventeen. There’s no reason for him to want to hurt me. He came to us in the middle of May and I gave him a place to stay and some work and even some pocket money,” and he looked back to where the plane was and Sandy was standing by herself. Patches was gone. In the dimming light he could not see him anywhere. He exhaled and looked back at Tommy.

“You’re a remarkable woman, Tommy.”

“You’re right, I’m remarkable. But, Bud,

there's something not right with this whole thing. I can't see Patches doing you harm, drunk or sober. I didn't smell anything on his breath. Are you sure you did the right thing?"

He stayed silent, so Tommy added, "It's going to be dark soon. Why don't you fly the plane back to the air show, I'll drive the rig back and Sandy can meet us there in her car. Then, you can move the big rig to wherever it is supposed to go, and Sandy and I can come back here in her car. Unless we see Patches first, and then one or the other of us is going to give him a ride. You realize that, don't you?" He nodded. "We can check out your standing and decide what to do. I know that things always look different the next day."

"You can drive that rig?"

"Sure. Double-clutch through eighth and then slip-shift through sixteenth. Then, overdrive if I get up to fifty-five... or would you rather I fly the plane back?" and her eyes twinkled with naughtiness.

"No. You get the ground transport."

"Well the first thing you're going to learn about us Swifts, Sandy and me, is that we don't boast, we *do!*" and she poked him in the chest.

"Swift, as in those watch bracelets?" The name finally registered with him.

“Yeah, yeah, yeah. Swifts bracelets. *Blah, blah, blah*. Changing the world one wrist at a time... whoopie!” She was coming to loathe the reaction some people gave her when she mentioned her last name. It was almost as if those people were ready to add, “But, you can’t possibly be one of *those* Swifts. Surely they are all brilliant men and not some big-chested bimbo— woman like *you!*”

Bud was dumbfounded. “Sure. Right. The plane is going to be hard enough to land in this twilight so I’d better get a move on.” He led her to the rig and gave her the keys. “Don’t stall it in heavy traffic because you have to go through all the shut down and plug re-heat procedures before a restart and that can take a full minute if you don’t exactly know what you are doing, and you will be holding up a lot of vehicles by the time you get it done and start pulling forward,” was all he said and turned to Sandy and asked, “Would you mind finding Patches and bringing him back? I don’t want to be responsible for him being eaten by bears or wolverines or vicious pumas or whatever wild carnivorous animals you keep in the woods around here.”

No matter what Bud said or how angry he was, he still worried about the older man.

“Sure, Bud, glad too.”

Chapter Three: The Night Tells All

Sandy found Patches trudging up the road to Shopton, the Podunk town a few miles from the Construction Company. His limp was so bad that he had to stop every eleven steps for a nineteen second rest. He was so busy counting each step and each second—they had to be exact and always the same or he would have to go back and start all over—so he did not notice her as she pulled up next to him. Even though her convertible top was down, she rolled down the window and called out to him.

“Patches, I’m Sandy Swift, one of the tasty little numbers you might have noticed back at the Construction Company when Bud was being such a tur— ummm... such a naughty boy. Please get into the car. I’ll take you back. No. Not to the Construction Company, silly,” she told him as he looked back the way he had come, and she swung the door open. “I’ll take you back to the air show.”

“No thanks, Miss Snady, and sorry about the typo there. I can’t go back. You never can go back home. Not even in Indiana, no matter what that Gomer fella sings about!” He trudged on.

“Get in, Patches, I command you. We must talk, but not out here on the open road for

Gypsies may be listening from behind every tree stump.”

“You are some weird lady, lady. Ya know that, doncha?” He stopped and looked at her. They both knew he couldn’t go much farther and she did sound sincere. And, if he stood just so he could glance down her shirt and that was worth the price of admission any day. It had, after all, been many years since there was a Mrs. Patches to give him those privileges.

He got into the car. It was dark now and Sandy took it slow, she wanted time to talk to him and think.

After he counted to exactly fifty-two and tapped his right index finger on his left knee eleven times, Patches looked at her and asked, “Why do you want to help? We’re strangers.”

“My family just went through a couple years of crap and I know how it feels to be left out in the cold. You have the right to be hurt by what Bud said. We can all see that Bud has a blind spot for his brother, JJ. He knows there is something to worry about with the boy; he gets a mite too defensive about him. So tell me about him.”

“JJ showed up one day in the middle of May, just two days before the spring air shows and flying competitions started. He gave Bud some

excuse about finishing classes early, but we all knew that was so much hogwash. The kid's a natural born dropout if there ever was one. Anyway, Bud took him in and told their parents that JJ was staying with him for a spell. They seemed to think that was bogus 'cause JJ never could spell ta save his soul. And, now that he ain't got one, he's in even deeper."

Sandy scowled for a moment before asking, "Can't Bud do anything with him? Beat a little sense into the boy? Whip him—in the literal sense—into shape?"

"Naw. Bud's independent as all get out and takes care of himself, and thinks everyone else ought ta be like that. He's only been out of the Air Force for about nine months now and is all wound up with this flying business and hasn't noticed the kind of evil folk JJ has been with lately."

"This company that JJ is keeping," inquired Sandy, "is it that bad?" She took a look at Patches' face and could see that it was.

"Well, for one thing there's this little slice of sleaze called Porchy or Porcha Flagger or something like that. Chubby and not too bright, but she's got a pair of feminine charms she don't mind flashing around if it gets her something. And, she's all tied up in knots over some Ruskie kid whose uncle is bad news in all upper case

caps, ninety-six point block typeface and above the banner! I got a question for you, Miss... uh..."

"Swift. Sandy Swift."

"Right. Miss Swift, I knows I should have told Bud, specially about that little strumpet, but he's been so busy trying to get a few wins in. I could have made him listen. That Flagger chickadee and her Ruskie friends is nothing but bad news. That's in all upper case—"

"I get it, Patches!" Sandy interrupted him. "Flagger as in Mr. A. Flagger of Shopton Community Bank?"

"I don't know about that, Miss Swift, but he's a Flagger fer sure! He's a lot of other things as well, some of them startin' with the letter 'a' too!"

"That's the same A. Flagger all right. Go on."

"I never came across a flyer and ground crew that is always causing some kind of trouble like them Rusikes. Oh, there's poker or craps games or Three Handed Draco or Spit in the Principles Eye or Nine Card Nun Fun going all night, plus licker, girls, a little of the wacky weed, some crystal meth and black tar heroin and a few magic mushrooms... and fist fights. Most of the circuit people stay away from them but there're

always new suckers to be found in every show we do. JJ finds it exciting... they use him as a gopher. And that Flagger trollop pays him in little squeezes and peeks and the occasional handy.”

“What’s that?”

He shook his head sadly. “Nothin’ a nice girl like you ought ta know about.”

“Well, if you’re not going to tell me about that, tell me more about the girl herself,” she prodded him—verbally, not physically because she needed to keep both hands on the wheel as they came around a fairly blind corner in the road.

“A. Flagger’s tarty little granddaughter is always hanging around and causing trouble with the younger boys. Not just JJ. Where lots of girls use what they got between their ears, she’s usin’ what she’s got between her— Oh, sorry Miss. I was about to make some allusion regarding her vagina but not in a pleasant way and nothin’ fit for female aural consumption. Anyways, JJ is always trailing after her like a lost puppy dog with his tongue draggin’ along the ground.” Patches’ voice betrayed his dismay.

They came to the temporary gate erected to keep out unwanted visitors when the air show and carnival were not in actual operation. Sandy

saw that it was slightly ajar so she used her bumper to nudge it open and drove a dozen or so yards in before stopping.

“Thanks for listening.”

“Patches, we’ll find out the truth somehow, believe me. Tommy and I will be on this like stink on— well, take it for granted that we are going to get to the bottom of this. Hopefully before someone gets the absolute you-know-what beaten out of them and ends up in an induced coma in the Shopton Hospital for several days!”

He nodded his head and said, “Did I mention that the Ruskie pilot and crew are all godless Ruskies. And by the number of tattoos they all have, they’re hard core. All of ‘em been in bad prisons at some time in their miserable lives. They each got that hammer and sickle thing plus a spike through a skull and a little kitten hangin’ in a noose, and I seen two of them with ink of women with only one leg... ‘stumpies’ they call em, or so I hear. These are bad people!” He closed the door and rapped the roof twice. She drove off toward the gate. Just outside she pulled over, stopped and tapped her bracelet to activate the phone.

“Hello, Tommy. Where are you?” She paused, listening. “You are? Okay. I’ll come back in. I’m at the front gate to the carnival.”

She paused, listening. “Yes, sure I’ll be there in a few minutes. I know where you are. Ciao, Bella,” and she put the phone back on her wrist.

She looked around for a moment and decided, “A shortcut is in order, Sandy my girl. Nobody ever got waylaid by taking a shortcut.” She was forgetting, obviously, about Little Red Riding Hood, but there were no recent sightings of big wolves, bad or otherwise, around Lake Copeland. She set off on foot following the parking lot markers.

She quickly found herself standing in a ditch.

“Darn, if I didn’t just walk off of the dark lot and into a dark ditch,” she said under her breath. “I’d better follow the ditch the rest of the way,” Sandy told herself. The moon was bright and the going was mucky, but she reached the end of the ditch when it petered out right at the back of a large tent. She was about to climb out and go around it when she heard voices. One was a young teen male and the other had a girlish—but nasally in the way that makes you want to strangle the speaker—grating sort of voice. Like Fran Drescher when she is REALLY overdoing it.

“That Tommy and Sandy may be super hot, but their shenanigans in assisting my oblivious older brother have really messed things up,” said an angry male voice. “Not only did they give

him a place to land, I think the tall Brit is hot for him. She's way better looking than you. The really bad thing is that one of them fixed the plane and now he can fly in the final races."

"Well then, JJ, I guess you'll have to stop that from happening," the aforementioned, irritating female voice shot back, "especially if you want that I.O.U. to disappear and not have my Russian friends visit you with that punishment we spoke about a few weeks ago."

"Jeez, you've got to get your nasal cavities reamed out or something. Get rhinoplasty. Have your septum undeviated. You could etch glass with that voice of yours. Besides, I already did you're the whole 'disable Bud's plane with the secretly placed red rag in the air intake port' thing in trade for canceling that IOU. He didn't finish that race today, did he?" he shouted at her.

"No he didn't, but he can still fly. You know who wanted him out completely, my boy," she retorted. "As in permanently out. Do you know what that means?"

"It means your Ruskie overlord wants Bud dead, but I already told you that I ain't doing that. And, I'm not a boy!" he shot back, "and if your flyer is any good he should be able to win." JJ laughed in her face.

Phlegm sprayed out and a little glob hit her in

the middle of her forehead.

“Yew!” she exclaimed wiping the offending slime away with the back of her hand.

“Me, what?” JJ asked, not quite quick enough on the uptake.

“Not ‘you,’ you idiot! Yew as in ick!”

“But, they are spelled differently. You’re the idiot here,” JJ exclaimed, now more confused than ever.

“Huh? Of course you and yew are spelled differently,” she told him, cocking her head to one side like a confused chihuahua.

“What? I’m talking about y-o-u and i-c-k. What are you bangin on about? I think you spent too much time out in the sun today,” the boy told the pudgy girl. “Should have stayed out long enough to melt some of that lard off.”

She reached out and grabbed him by the hair, pulling his face close to hers. Before he could pull back, she licked his nose, kissed both of his eyelids and tousled his hair. “You do know I’d do anything for you, don’t you, JJ?” she purred.

The teen narrowed his eyes. “Y-o-u, y-e-w, or i-c-k?” he inquired wiping his nose.

“Moron!”

“Female of cheap negotiable affection!”

She sighed. “Okay. You have me there. But

you have to make this right... or else.”

“If you think I’m going to continue to sabotage Bud’s plane and possibly kill my own brother just to get a look or two at your flabby body, you’re got another thing coming!”

Rolling her eyes, she rasped out “Think, you dolt.”

“I am thinking!” he shot back.

She rolled her eyes, again telling him, “No. I mean the saying is ‘you’ve got another *think* coming.’ Not a *thing*. Crimminy. *Thing* doesn’t make any sense! Stupid boy!”

“At least I don’t have thunder thighs and cellulite,” he insulted her knowing that she was very sensitive about her chubby legs and wrinkly over-collagen-ized flesh.

“Jerk!”

“Piggy! Raspy, squeaky fatty-fatty two-by-four!”

Portia ran to one corner of the tent and began to sob.

“If you want me to take that back, you’ll have to sweeten the pot, my dear. No more of that kissy, kissy thing and then pushing me away that you do. If you want me to do this, you’re going to pay a woman’s price. Twenty-three bucks an hour, plus tip!”

A look of disgust swept over her face for a second and then she smiled. “You get rid of your brother,” she said and gave him a little kiss, “and I’m yours tomorrow night! Total starkers.” She leaned in to give him a longer kiss.

“If you’re going to be naked, I’ll need to insist that the lights are off and that nobody hears about it,” he insisted.

Sandy was so embarrassed at hearing this exchange, and picturing the porky Portia Flagger in the buff—a mental picture she wanted to pour acid on to erase—that she swooned slightly, and overdramatically, and fell into the side of the tent. She recovered and ran along the ditch.

“What’s that?” shouted JJ when he saw and heard the tent puff in. “If you’ve hired someone out there to take pictures of us through that little slit in the canvas at the back of the tent that overlooks that ditch, well—” He couldn’t think of how to end that sentence so he pushed the girl aside and ran out.

By the time Sandy caught up with Tommy and Bud, she was laughing to herself and was barely able to get the story out.

“I’ve seen her around,” Bud told them both, “and when I say ‘around,’ I mean that she is a round little piece of trash! To think that she is corrupting my innocent brother, JJ, who

obviously is willing to say anything she gives him in a carefully written script that they both must have been rehearsing when you eavesdropped on them.”

Sandy looked at Tommy who looked first at Bud and then back to her cousin.

She mouthed, “What a fool!” and shook her head sadly.

Chapter Four: Fire Destroys

“So that’s all of it,” Sandy was sitting in Bud’s motor coach a half hour later after going back over everything she had heard while standing at the back of the tent. She and Tommy were sipping lapsang souchong tea and had evidently gotten through Bud’s thick head and blinders.

“Are you sure, Sandy, really sure it was JJ?” A look of horror was in his eyes.

“Sorry Bud, but the pig girl *did* call him JJ. Several times. I got a really good look at him when he was standing facing the back of the tent. If you are six three, he’s about five eleven, forty pounds lighter with a slightly concave-looking chest instead of your very manly and muscular one. I suppose that if we could retro-age you to his age, you would both have the same hair and face with a few spots and identical darling brown eyes. Oh, also he was wearing a red bandana around his neck and cowboy boots. Not on his neck, on his feet.”

“Rats! That’s him all right. As a kid we would call him The Outlaw. The funny thing about that was he liked it and started to wear the boots and bandana for good luck. Kept the girls away in droves, but he didn’t seem to notice. It’s no wonder he’s so attention-starved that he

would even consider touching that flab bag, Flagger. I should have seen this coming. He'd always cause mischief. And, he used to steal my model airplanes and fill them with lighter fluid and set them ablaze and throw them at the neighbor's cats. I thought it was to get attention and he would outgrow it." Bud could not believe in how stupid he had been. "When I get my hands on him, I'm going to wring his neck! Plus, I'm going to tell mom and dad that he is being a little tur— ummm, a little jerk."

They sat silently finishing their tea. Bud was getting more and more agitated. He was mad at himself for letting it get so far out of hand, both with JJ and with his interpersonal relationship handling with the one man he valued as both a mentor and a trusted employee.

"Oh, good golly," Bud moaned at last. "What am I going to say to Patches? I've railroaded him right out of here." He put his face in his hands and leaned over the table.

Tommy licked her right index and middle fingers and then whacked them across the back of his exposed neck. "Wake up and do something, Bud!"

He jumped up and stared at her trying to figure out if she was attacking him or just playing. Seeing her teasing smile, he sat back down, nodding his agreement that something

had to be done, and soon.

“We all make mistakes. Learn from this one, pray that Patches will forgive you, and then move on. Oh, and giving the man a little bonus if you win tomorrow might help. I’m sure that Patches knows that you don’t really hate him and that you have been blind to JJ ever since he arrived in the middle of May and each and every one of your troubles began just two days later.” Tommy had her head tilted down and was staring at him as if over a pair of glasses. Pushing the invisible specs up her nose, she asked him, “Do you have any objections to what I said?”

He shook his head, rubbing the back of his neck that still stung from her wet finger slap.

Aloud, he said, “Thanks, Tommy, and you too, Sandy. With friends like you, we’ll get out of this mess. I must find both JJ and Patches before there is more trouble. You ladies make yourselves at home and I’ll be back as soon as I have beaten some sense into one of them and repaired a damaged relationship with the other.” He got up and walked to the door with both girls practically stepping on his heels to come along.

“All for one and one for all, and three for a quarter and fifty percent off the last Friday of every month. It’s a Swift thing. Let’s go!” Tommy gave him a shove and they all stumbled

out the door.

It was after midnight by the time they finished searching the grounds. JJ seemed to have disappeared into a hole somewhere and Patches was obviously laying low. At least, that is what they all hoped and that the older man had not run afoul of thugs and hoodlums—or Ruskies!—and was now laying beaten to a bloody pulp somewhere. Or, worse.

“This is not going to happen tonight,” Bud grumped. “I’ll assume that you don’t trust me to sleep in the same small motor home as you two, so why don’t you stay there and I’ll bunk in with a flyer friend. I’ve got to be up at seven for preflight checks so maybe you two can make with the domestics and bring me a mug of coffee around seven-thirty.” He looked at them trying to gauge their tolerance for chauvinistic behavior. Finding them both too weary to glare at him, he continued, “After I run through the plane we can have another sweep around for either of them before the competition tomorrow morning. I mean *this* morning. Man I’m tired! Let’s get some sleep.” With that, he led them off.

As they were passing one of the concession stands and turning down the road to the campsite they thought they heard a moan from behind the last stand. They stopped and listened, but heard

nothing. Sandy looked at Tommy and shrugged. “Must be those vicious wolverines.” With that, they started to walk again. Bud stopped when he believe that he heard it again. He walked quickly back the way they had come and circled around the stand.

“Tommy! Sandy! Go get help—I found Patches, and he’s hurt. He seems to have run afoul of thugs and hoodlums—or Ruskies!—and is now laying here beaten to a bloody pulp. Or, worse.”

The girls rushed to the back of the stand. Bud was kneeling by Patches’ side, taking out a small flashlight from his pocket to look at the injured man. Sandy gasped when the light illuminated the older man’s face, and she buried it in Tommy’s chest effectively blocking out both sight and sound. And air. Patches’ face was a mass of blood and his eyes were both swollen shut. His left arm was bent backward at the elbow and one of his legs looked twisted.

Tommy pushed her cousin away and they both fell to the ground next to the stricken man. Tommy looked at Sandy who swallowed and then gently took his head and cradled it on her lap. She touched his face and whispered to him.

“Patches, we’re here—Bud, Tommy and me. You really look icky, but we’re here for you. We’re here and were going to help you. You just

hang on. Help is coming.” Her tears fell on his face making some of the blood thinner and causing it to run down and drip onto her pants.

Tommy had called 9-1-1 and was giving directions for the police and an ambulance. Bud was on his phone getting the carnival’s security people to open the gates for the emergency services vehicles. He also wanted to have a word with them—later when he wasn’t so worried about Patches—to find out why they weren’t patrolling this area, and obviously hadn’t been for more than an hour, from the sight of the drying blood on Patches’ face.

As he contemplated what he was going to yell at them, sirens could be heard and a small crowd of carnies with lights were gathered around them. The medics immediately called for air transport as they started to stabilize Patches.

In minutes the sound of a helicopter could be heard and the lead carnival man yelled out, “All right, you geeks and freaks! Make a circle over there in that clear spot and point the lights up to attract that helo. Once it is coming in, all lights down to the ground so they see where they are landing. Now, people! Don’t wait for an invitation.” Seconds later they were gone and a minute after that the helicopter landed.

As the EMTs were loading Patches into the helicopter he called out. “Fire, the planes, fire!”

and fell unconscious again. Sandy, who was standing right next to him, heard him shout out. She called to Bud who was with the police trying to give a report. She told him what Patches said. Bud looked at Patches just before the older man disappeared into the helicopter.

“Crap! Fire! Planes, planes on fire! Everybody to the tents!” he shouted and ran off down the road. Tommy looked at Sandy who was getting into the ‘copter and then at the departing Bud. She grabbed a policeman and began yanking him along as she explained to him what had just happened.

Bud was half way to the tents when the sky lit up with a fireball. It lasted only ten seconds and a loud “*Vaaroom*” sound echoed throughout the night. The concussion wave knocked several people off their feet and the helicopter, that had just taken off, shook as it gained altitude. Bud pushed his way through the crowd and stood gazing at the now totally missing tent and the five burning planes that were in it. A husky man walked toward Bud and put his hand on his shoulder.

“Sorry, Bud, we did the best we could. It happened so fast. We couldn’t save both of your aircraft.” Bud nodded his head, lost for words.

“But we did save *her*,” and he pointed off to one side where the dark silhouette of a pylon

plane could be seen. Bud's legs gave out and the man grabbed him and held him up. He recovered and mumbled thanks in his shock.

"You're not going to like this next part, Bud," the show manager said after weighing up the flier to see if he could take any more bad news. After all, word about Patches had made it all through the pilot community at the air race grounds. "We caught the arsonist coming out with a flaming torch in one hand and half a dozen road flares in his back pockets. And, an empty 5-gallon gas can under his arm. And a diagram showing where all the different planes were positioned, except that he had the Porta-loo cluster marked and not any aircraft. Really stupid kid if you ask me."

"A kid? Where is he?" He clenched his right fist. The manager motioned to a group of men. They parted and someone pushed JJ forward.

Bud reached out and grabbed him by his neck and shook him while screaming. "You little shi— uhhh, you miserable tur— damn... Why did you do it, JJ, why?"

"I had to, see. They were going to kill me if I didn't, see!" he gasped as he tried to pull away. "They've got the goods on me, see!"

"Who are *they*?" demanded Bud releasing his grip just enough so that the teen could speak,

“and why are you doing an Edward G. Robinson impression? Now isn’t the time for that!”

“I can’t tell you anything, or they’ll really kill me. And, I was hoping to lighten the mood a bit. I could do a little James Cagney or even Humphrey Bogart if you’d rather.”

Bud tightened his grip once again until JJ’s eyes began to bulge out, and then tossed him to the ground.

“Get him to the cops before *I* kill him. See!” Bud told the other pilots and crew that after what had happened to Patches he needed someone to guard his plane so he could go to the hospital. By the time he was ready to go, Tommy showed up with Sandy’s car, and she had the directions to the hospital.

“Where’s Sandy?” Bud asked as they zoomed out of the gate.

A muffled complaint came from behind them as they drove over a bump, and he knew that she had taken one for the team and was in the little car’s trunk. He leaned over to whisper in Tommy’s ear, “You know. She could have ridden up here and sat on my lap.”

Tommy just smiled and gave him a little nod, saying nothing.

The sun was just starting to shine when the doctor from the E.R. came out to find them.

“He’s in recovery and in critical condition... He will be for a couple of days. If nothing goes wrong he’ll be awake in about forty-eight hours and fifty-three minutes, give or take. But right now we’re keeping him in a coma till the brain swelling goes down. It will also give the nurses a chance to get all that blood cleaned up. We had to do the stitching through it and it was all gooey and sticky.”

“What about other damage?” Bud asked. He felt more responsible for this than ever.

The doctor opened his chart, pretended to look at several sheets of paper, made a few humming noises, and then said, “Beside the head injury: one ear drum – destroyed; the cornea of one eye - damaged and needs to be re-attached later; one arm and one leg – snapped both in two places; a lovely trio of ribs were cracked and one other broken. And, we discovered that he has a terrible case of hemorrhoids.”

“When can we see him?” asked Sandy.

“Six minutes from...” he waited until the sweep second hand on his watch had come around, “...now, but he won’t know it. I’ll tell the nurse to let you see him for a minute and eighteen seconds. You won’t see much since he’s bandaged from head to toe and there are several IV’s running. He’s in traction so don’t touch him. This isn’t *Mad, Mad, Mad, Mad*

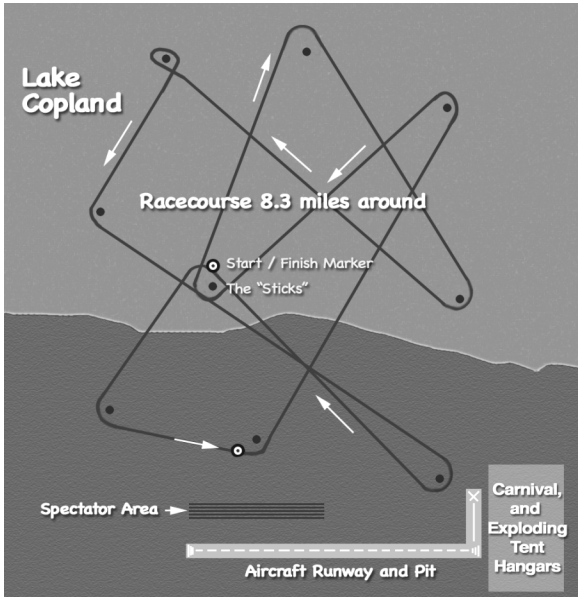
World comedy traction, This is serious real life traction, so no slipping on banana peels and making anybody laugh,” he warned them.

Four minutes and fifty-one seconds later they stood around the bed. Machines were whirling and blinking and *Ping!*ing away, doing their best to keep Patches alive. Sandy wanted so much to let him know that they were there but settled for talking quietly to him. Bud stood there clenching his fists in rage. Tommy held onto his left arm trying to calm him.

Bud finally spoke up. “Patches, you get well, okay? I need to be able to tell you that you were right about JJ. How could I have missed the connection between his arriving in mid May and all my problems starting just two days later. I’ve been a fool and I need you to wake up and tell me that. Then, I can apologize to you. If it’s the last thing I do, I’ll get the rats who did this to you. I promise you!”

He glanced at Sandy and Tommy. “Girls, if you’re ready, we’ve got a race to win. When Patches wakes up I want that big, ugly trophy to be the first thing he sees.”

Chapter Five: A Day at The Races



Formula One Class A Professional Circuit FAA-Approved Pylon races are flown over a course of between 5 and 13.5 miles, doing three laps. modeled after the serpentine belt on a 2003 Chevy heavy-duty pickup engine, the course is flown between fifty feet to the maximum of three hundred and fifty feet. Spotters are located at each turn, which are marked by a "Stick" made of a telephone pole fifty feet high topped with

fifty-five gallon drums painted red and white alternately for visibility. Pilots either stay on the outside of each stick and above the bottom drum or they are disqualified. Spotters can be bribed to ignore minor infractions and frequently rat out cheap pilots. Their motto is, "One Salmon P. Chase guarantees you the race!"

“**L**adies and gentlemen, boys and girls, children of all ages, welcome to the East Coast Formula One Class A Professional Circuit FAA-Approved Pylon Race Finals sponsored by A. Flagger Communication. The field of contestants has been reduced to just eight pilots. We would have had twelve, but four of our racers burned or exploded last night. Made a great pyrotechnic display that you all missed. Too bad. Anyway... Our first head-to-head race will be between our own Rex Wolfe from New York City and Bud Kenworth from San Diego, California. They’re both on the flight line and ready to go... and yes, ladies and gentlemen, we have just received clearance from the FAA to start the race. So hang on to your hats and enjoy the show.”

The crowd was roaring louder than the idling engines of both planes. Bud was anxious to start this race. He looked over at Tommy who was ready to close the canopy of the plane and

quickly reached out, took the back of her head in his large hand, pulled her toward his face and gave her a quick kiss.

“What’s that for?” asked Tommy as she licked her lips.

“For luck,” he replied giving her a small wink.

Tommy took his face in both her hands and practically wrenched him up and out of the cockpit, saying, “You call that a kiss?” And she kissed him long and deeply. When she finally let him go she said, “Now, *that’s* a kiss! Go get ’em, Flyboy.” She slammed the canopy shut and climbed down the ladder. Sandy helped her push the ladder back and pulled the wheel chocks.

Wolfe, the other pilot, watched the display and leaned over toward his pit chief.

“Don’t even think about it!” warned the grease-covered man as he quickly climbed down from the side of the plane. A moment later Wolfe was off the ground. Bud quickly followed suit.

As they watched the two planes line up behind the pace plane Sandy nudged Tommy and asked, “Mind telling me what that was all about? Aren’t you moving too fast with Bud?” She was concerned for her friend.

“Sandy, I’m twenty-six and haven’t been

with a— ummm... I haven't had— errr... that is I haven't taken tea with the Parson for almost a year. You don't know the half of it," she sighed.

"You mean make the beast with two backs, right?" Sandy inquired.

"Yeah. I feel like I've known Bud all my life. That we're meant to be together like we already could have been if we'd met many years ago. It's a sense of déjà vu. Or, possibly déjà caressée or déjà aimé. Look it up." She slowly shook her head to clear out that feeling and smiled at Sandy. "Keep an eye on my six, as they say, and keep me safe and sound."

Sandy placed her arm over Tommy's right shoulder. "I'll keep you safe if you'll do me the same favor. Look out... here comes Samson!" They both laughed.

Hercules Samson was a man a few years older than Tommy, and had provided an incredible load consolidation and payback program for the Swift Construction Company when Tommy came up with the bracelet phone idea that eventually saved the industrial complex. He was pretty sweet on Sandy Swift.

"Miss me, ladies?" asked the tall, handsome man as he threw his arms out to hug them both. He spent a moment longer with Sandy than Tommy and loosely held Sandy's hand

afterwards. Sandy looked over at Tommy and gave a shrug that spoke of her combination helplessness and hope that her British cousin would stay the heck out of things for a while. Though loathe to admit it, Sandy was just as sweet on Haz Samson as he was on her.

“What did I miss?”

“Well,” Sandy told him in a low voice, “Tommy kissed Bud after he gave he a little peck. She was anything but shy about it and we’re all glad he had to go flying or it might have gotten totally embarrassing!”

“They’re just lining up now, Haz. Here they come!” shouted Tommy from twenty feet away.

The planes flew side-by-side behind the pace plane, fifty feet up, as they approached the start/finish marker. The pace plane peeled off to the right over the stands just before reaching the starting pole and both racers poured on the power. A sharp left turn and Wolfe had the lead. Bud decided to fly fifty feet higher up knowing that Wolfe was a sloppy flyer in his turns. Eventually he would slip downward as he knifed his turns—losing lift because he would be almost on his side—requiring that he flatten out his plane and slipping outward, and Bud did not want to be in the way when it happened. Wolfe had already caused, unintentionally, at least five crashes of other planes in his career.

They doglegged left again and flew the almost zig zag course around pylon after pylon until they had completed the second lap. The crowd went wild as Bud dropped down slightly and edged in front of Wolfe as they passed the stands. In the third turn, Wolfe's plane nosed downward for a second. To keep it from hitting the ground, he had to maneuver the plane to a horizontal position which forced him to take a long outside turn towards the lake instead of the snap turn Bud did. By the time they were half way through the course there was no way for Wolfe to beat him short of Bud crashing or having an engine seize up or explode or some other catastrophic accident occurring.

None of that happened.

Bud flashed past the finish line and climbed skyward performing several barrels rolls and a back loop. Most of the crowd went wild with a few suddenly souring to the cocky flyer's unnecessary display of poor sportsmanship. It was only the quarterfinals after all!

He landed and taxied over to his assigned space in the 'pit' area. Tommy and Sandy pushed the ladder against the side of the plane while Haz kicked the chocks around the nose wheel. Bud was so high on adrenalin that he jumped to the ground, grabbed Tommy and swung her around and around yelling, "Dammit!

I just sprained my ankle!”

Bud’s confidence was back and he felt on top of the world. He remained in Tommy’s embrace a few moments longer than absolutely necessary, but he didn’t seem to notice.

“And... break!” suggested Haz to the two clinchers. “Who’s the daring young man and his flying machine?”

Sandy said to Bud as he calmed down, “Haz, this is Bud Kenworth, pilot extraordinaire. Bud, this is Hercules A. Samson—Haz to friends—and my friend, and financier to the Swifts. In other words, he saved our bacon right after Tommy came over from England.” The two men shook hands. After a moment they were grinning in pain but not letting go. A full minute later both nodded and released the other’s hand, then smiled at each other and slapped each other on the shoulders while they shook their right hands to restore circulation.

“Boys, now that the ‘mine’s stronger than yours’ display is over with, can we do something constructive?” asked Sandy as the girls laughed at the guys.

Tommy gave Bud’s ankle a little kick to check to see if he had been exaggerating it. His wince told her that it hurt plenty, but it could have been worse. “Sorry.”

“It’s okay,” he told her. “In any game I could still make it around to at least second base. How about tonight?”

“Thanks for calling me, Sandy,” Haz said, trying to ignore Bud as he smiled at her. “Now that I know a bit about what’s been going on in this air show, and know a few of the players, I’ve got to look into this further. If I can prove a connection between A. Flagger and the Russian Mob—a match made in hell if I ever saw one—I can probably get that miserable bastard shut down. At the very least I can get a good friend of mine in the FBI to raid A. Flagger’s businesses and see if they can catch anyone. Russian mobsters, illegal Haitian mailmen, whatever. It fits into all my other troubles of late. I’ll be back before Sergey Levenkov’s first run.” He gave Sandy another hug and slipped into the crowd in his inconspicuous three-piece Armani suit with red silk power tie.

“What’s that all about?” asked Bud as he pulled the ladder over to the front of the racer and opened the engine cowling. Tommy and Sandy pulled another ladder up to the other side and joined him looking at the engine.

“It’s a long story, Bud, and Tommy can fill you in on it later. Tonight, possibly,” Sandy replied from her side of the plane giving him a ‘I understand the situation’ grin. “A. Flagger and

his family have been a thorn in the Swift's side for a century. Some financial fiddling got A. Flagger on Haz's list." Sandy looked down at the motor and was afraid to touch it. "Haz has kind of like a super 'Who's been naughty?' list."

Tommy slid the dipstick back into the engine. "She's down a little oil, Bud. I'll go get a bottle and put it in. This batch ought to last through the next race although I'd suggest a full drain and change and new filter before the final. Check the gaskets and seals for leaks," and Tommy was off.

Sandy continued her story, "Haz bought a former Russian satellite network over in the Caspian Sea region, but A. Flagger wanted it, too. He pulled the aforementioned shenanigans in the stock market and cost Haz tens of millions. Haz rallied his friends in the investment community and stopped the rush on his stocks and stabilized his finances. He could never prove that A. Flagger was involved except that everyone knows A. Flagger wanted to globalize his own communication company and Haz put a stop to it by obtaining the network. Haz is the happy owner of six satellites that are about to shut down in the next year or so. He knew that when he bought the network, and that's why he could afford to do it. The Russians needed to squeeze a little more time out of them

but didn't have any money. They took Kopeks on the Ruble."

"Huh? What's that in American?"

"Pennies on the dollar, Bud. Fully operational it would have been worth half a billion. He picked it up for eleven million. Pretty good shopping if you ask an expert. He's planning on replacing the old ones one by one and, will be using some of Swift's components that utilize Tommy's computer chip designs. But, A. Flagger Communications has been doing the overall construction of the new satellites, since *they* built the originals a dozen years ago."

The story had dragged on so long that Tommy returned and then topped off the engine oil before Sandy finished. Closing the cowling, the three settled down on the ground in the shade of the left wing to watch the other races.

"Is that the whole story?" Bud finally inquired after watching two flyers race by.

"Not by a long shot," Sandy started again. "A few months back, the Russian Mob tried to invade the town where the network employees live. With Haz' money and connections, a mercenary army got hired and deployed in just two days. He air dropped them at night from an old surplus C-140 he owns and they were waiting for the Mob to come into town. It was

over quick. Haz 15 : Mob 0. Now the town is an armed fortress with the people fearing for their lives.”

“Can’t the Russians do anything?”

“Wouldn’t make a lot of difference. Haz is moving the whole operation to New Guinea in two weeks. With the Russian government curtailing travel to that region, the Mob can’t get more of their own people there for at least a month and it will be deserted by then. Haz’s rented an old abandoned radio telescope from NASA and is converting it to his use. He will move any of his Russian personnel that want to go including their families. The Mob will probably still go in, but they will discover that the Kremlin has finally noticed them and sent in troops of their own. *Kablooey!*” she finished firing off two ‘finger guns.’

“Is that why they make no bones about having summer maneuvers in that area?” asked Bud.

“Yes, it is and they will stay there until they drive all the Mob people out. After that, I guess they plan to use the little town as target practice. Well, when I say ‘after,’ they might do that a little early and use it *while* the Mob people are still there.”

“Why do the Russians care? They’re the ones

who sold the network. If it moves, it is out of their hands. And their hair.”

“Their nationwide communication setup still depends on at least four of those six satellites. They sold them and figured that it now becomes Haz’s problem. If Haz lets the network go down there will be holes in their total coverage, but that also puts Haz out of business... so he has to replace them. But, he knew the job was like that when he took it.”

Haz came back with a bag in his hands and passed out high-powered binoculars to everyone, saying, “Best way to watch the Russian wolf pull off his little trick.”

They gave him questioning looks but he would say no more.

Sergey was racing Archie Goodwin from Texas as the last run of this heat. The pace plane pulled out of the way and Sergey took the high altitude keeping abreast of Goodwin for over two and a half laps. As he passed the last lake stick marker he made his move. The plane suddenly accelerated for ten seconds putting him into the lead. Sergey dropped down to block Goodwin from passing him. There was no time left to pass and recover the extra distanced made by the maneuver. Sergey won easily.

“Did you see that?” shouted Bud. “He must

be using an illegal super charger of some kind. It's against the rules. How's he getting away with it?" He was amazed at the obvious infraction he had just witnessed.

Haz answered him. "He has been accused of cheating in the past but they never found a thing. His engine is always up to specs and nothing out of the ordinary is found. And, I know why."

Smiling at them, he pulled out a green plastic hose and told them about Sergey's secret. "His mechanic snakes a hose like this through a grommet in the fire wall and puts the end in front of the air intake for the carburetor. The other end is connected to a tank inside the cockpit. He opens the valve and gets ten seconds of zoom. After he's done with it, before he lands, he pulls it back and hooks it up to the emergency oxygen facemask. All those hoses look alike so nobody knows about the dirty trick. I had to bribe one of his ground crew for this information, but it was worth it. I can't wait to spoil his fun! I've got a call to make."

"Not yet, Haz!" exclaimed Bud. "I need to beat him. I owe it to Patches. You can report him as soon as I win... or lose. He can't jettison the tank and the judges only need a trace of the gas to get him." Bud's eyes were on fire.

"Bud, you can't beat that impromptu super charger." But seeing the flyer's determined look,

he said, "It's your neck, Buddy Boy... if the others are willing, who am I to say no?"

"Kenworth, you're up," called up the pit boss as the break between rounds was drawing to a close. Four flyers were left. Bud drew Albert Camus from Maryland and Sergey got Marty Heidegger from Washington State. Bud's chance would only come if he won his semi-final.

He needn't have worried. Bud easily won his race as Camus turned too quickly at the fourth dogleg clipping his right wing on the stick and almost crashing. Bud only had to beat the average speed from the previous heat. He did.

Sergey was just as lucky, as Heidegger's engine seized up and black smoke billowed out during lap one. He had to do a dead stick landing. Sergey also breezed in with a good time.

As soon as Camus had blown his chance to win the race, Tommy grabbed Sandy. "Time for a scavenger hunt. Bring your pretty face and body." It didn't take them long to find what Tommy wanted. One phone call, a quick drive down the road and some flirting on Sandy's part soon saw them back, a canvas tote bag in hand.

"Did you miss us, guys?" asked Tommy as she climbed into the plane. She wiggled herself

upside down under the instrument panel and began to fasten a yellow steel bottle under the seat with zip straps she had in her breast pocket.

“You can’t do that, Tommy!” hissed Bud as he and Haz climbed up to the cockpit and saw what she was doing.

“Bud. Once Haz exposes Sergey, these races are going to be vacated from the books. The important thing is for you to win before that. This puts you on the same dirty playing field as Sergey. It’s your skill against his, he just doesn’t know it. Now, be a dear and move up to the engine compartment.”

Tommy shoved the gas feed line through the firewall; Bud looked at it for a second and then took it. He sighed and went to work. “What is in this tank? It won’t ruin my engine, will it?”

“No, Bud, its nitrous oxide... laughing gas from a dental technician. It cost Sandy a hundred bucks and three buttons on her blouse and a few lip licks to get it.” Two pairs of eyes shifted to Sandy’s blouse. It was buttoned up to her throat.

“Sorry boys, no peep show unless you repay that hundred bucks!” Sandy said teasingly. Bud and Haz turned red and the girls giggled at them.

After Tommy hooked up the hose to the canister she remarked to Bud, “This will give you the same ten second acceleration that Sergey

has, so use it wisely, Grasshopper.”

Sergey took to the high altitude and mirrored Bud's moves. He knew Bud was a better flyer, so he hoped for either a mistake from Bud or his own burst of speed to win.

He chuckled, evilly—it even made him shiver—to himself as he thought of the surprise Bud would get when he landed and found out his friend, Patches, had been murdered. It was happening at this very moment. His crew would destroy Bud's plane that night as Bud and those damn Swift's grieved over the loss of their friend.

He swore as he realized he had lost concentration and it would cost him the race. He missed the last outgoing stick on the lake; even the super charger would do him no good. He swung wide, pulled a sharp right turn, and flew right at Bud, but hadn't properly computed the angle of approach and closest point of approach based on his speed and Bud's relative starting position. It was a rookie kamikaze mistake. Sergey's plane passed a hundred feet behind Bud, got all wobbly in the prop wash and barely managed to pull up before it could crash.

He flew off across the lake and disappeared.

“They’re hightailed it, sir, every last one of them.” While the FBI doesn’t report to civilians, this was a special case. The agent continued, “They got word somehow that we were coming and bugged out. All their equipment is gone and Sergey flew off the face of the earth. We have an all points bulletin out for them but it’s not likely to catch us anything.”

They were talking outside the hospital that Patches was in. “Have A. Flagger’s phone records subpoenaed along with all of his executive staff and his team of people at the air races. If *any* of them make a call back to headquarters during Bud Kenworth’s race with Levenkov, arrest them!”

“Will do. Oh. The orderly that tried to kill Mr. O’Brian is dead. He ran to the roof and jabbed himself in the gut with his poisoned syringe when he tripped on a vent pipe. Serves him right, although it would have been nice to have him alive to rat out whoever hired him. If that’s it, Mr. Samson, I’ve got paper work to do.”

He nodded his farewell and walked off to his car.

Haz decided not to tell his friends about the assassination attempt on Patches.

Chapter Six: After M*A*T*H

Two days later, Bud placed the meaningless racing trophy on the hospital table. Tommy and Sandy were with him in the dark room. All the lights were out except for a small work light near the monitoring equipment. The doctor was slowly stopping the IV drip to Patches' arm.

Sandy was holding his other hand. Given that they had only spoken for about twenty minutes that terrible night, she could not get over how much he had affected her. Sandy pondered as she looked at him, *Perhaps I feel so strongly about him because I can picture daddy in this bed instead of Patches. He was supposed to have gone with mother and Tom that day.* Out loud, she asked, "How long will it take for him to come around, Doctor?"

"Not long, Miss. Once this drug is stopped he will wake up in minutes, if there is no brain damage. Just give it up to three point eight minutes." He stepped back to watch.

"Well, Doctor?" asked Bud three point eight five minutes later, anxious for his friend.

"He's coming around. Jeez. Don't be so literal with the times. Always factor in a fifteen percent greater than/less than buffer. Ah, I see that his vital signs are good. His body is still in

bad shape, so give him time. Weeks at the very least before he can try taking his first step. After that, keep him away from wild women and some of those crazy dance clubs you hear about.”

Patches’ eyes began to flutter and his lips started to move. The only thing still stuck in or on him was the nasal cannula, his oxygen nosepiece. His eyes slowly focused on Sandy and a small smile crossed his face. “I’m dead,” he hoarsely whispered, “I’m seeing an angel so I must be a goner.” His eyes closed but his free hand slowly began moving toward Sandy’s chest. She knew she couldn’t begrudge the older man, so she sat there, holding her breath.

“That’s it, people, he’s good,” said the doctor seeing the upcoming encounter. “Everybody out. He needs all the rest he can get. Come back tomorrow and he’ll be ready to see people for a short period of time,” and the doctor ushered them out.

As they left, Patches opened one eye and muttered, “Killjoy!”

“Thomasina Swift, move away from the box!” shouted Sandy from in front of the loading docks. A week had passed since the pylon race.

Tommy laughed. “No worries, Sandy. It is a mystery box and you know that neither you nor I

can resist these things. Besides, it's for me. I've got one of the dock workers getting a forklift. I just found out about this delivery *for me* from an Air Force storage facility in New Mexico."

"Maybe it's from aliens... Area 51 you know." Sandy waved her hands in the air and moaned, "Woooooooooooo!"

Tommy looked perplexed. "What do ghosts have to do with Mexicans?"

Sandy doubled over laughing at her friend and finally said, "Sorry, Tommy. Other than that accent of yours, I keep forgetting that you're a Brit. Area 51 is where our government is supposed to be all of the hiding little green men and their little alien space ships." Sandy joined Tommy on the dock and helped her inspected the wooden box. A humming was heard and the forklift showed up.

"Where to, boss ladies?" asked the driver as he hoisted the box off the ground. The long box was swung around almost knocking Tommy to one side; she had been standing too close. She jumped back and chuckled at her close call.

"To the metal shop, Brad. I set up a work space there for my PHARC jet engine and this is too big for anywhere else." As they followed the forklift, Sandy asked, "If you completed the plans for the engine, why haven't you told daddy

and claimed your win?”

“Your father is so busy lately running things that I don’t have the heart to tell him. I took just enough Psychology courses at university to make me a nuisance, and one thing I recall clearly is that you don’t beat down a recovering man. I’m trying to give him a chance to finish his engine while I’m making a test model. As long as he finishes and has some level of success, we both are winners.”

“Tommy, you don’t have to wait. Daddy will be happy if you found a way to make it work.”

“True, I’m sure. But I made so many changes on it that I really have to build one and test it. For instance, where your father is still tinkering with a simple arc of plasma, I am adding layers of complexity. So much so that I’ve renamed mine to be a PHARC jet.”

“Fart jet?” Sandy asked wrinkling her nose.

“No, P-H-A-R-C. PHARC. Personal Hydrogen ARC. It is a great heat generator. Many were the winter nights that I wished I could have a really good PHARC while at school. I learned all about it my second year at Cambridge. I had a lab partner and we use to PHARC all the time. If we weren’t studying for other classes, we were PHARCing. We PHARCD there in the lab, PHARCD at the

Technology Centre, and once we PHARCEd right in the main town centre just to demonstrate how great PHARCing can be.”

Sandy looked aghast. “You make it sound nasty,” she whispered. “I’d keep that sort of talk down so others don’t misunderstand.”

Tommy looked at her strangely. It was the same thing whenever she discussed the technology. Shrugging she said, “Mr. Avery has ordered some of the things I need. I’m waiting for them to show up. I thought this might be a crate with those, but it’s way too big for that and it’s from the wrong place.”

Once they had it uncrated they were looking at an older military style jet engine in excellent condition. They found a hand scribbled note attached to it in magic marker.

Tell Air Chief Kenworth that we're even. I still think the 57 'vette he let me have is worth more than this hunk of junk, but I risked my stripes to get this for him. Hope it meets your needs. I replaced all the hoses. Couldn't fire it up, but it should work.

Private Four Fingers

“Bud comes through!” both girls screamed at the same time. They wondered who Private Four Fingers might be, and Tommy considered grilling Bud as to whether the presumed ‘he’ was actually a ‘she,’ but she was too happy with the gift to really worry about that sort of thing.

“Did I hear my name taken in vain?” asked Bud as he approached the two ladies.

“Bud, you darling man!” yelled Tommy as she turned and ran to him giving him a kiss. “This earns you another chance at bat, if you get my meaning? Maybe a triple...” She was just giddy with happiness.

He turned bright red thinking about what she was suggesting. Recovering, he asked, “So, how often can a guy give his girl a jet engine and have her happier than if it was a diamond ring.”

Tommy looked at him in astonishment and then looked at her finger, then at the jet, and then at Sandy.

“Well? What’s better?” he asked.

“The jet!” they both said at the same time. Tommy touched Bud’s cheek with her fingertips and added. “Later, flyboy. I may take that ring in a year or two, OK?”

“Don’t worry; I don’t plan to rush things. We both have a lot going on. Your companionship is what I need and want right now. The rest...?”

“Who says that Mr. Bud Kenworth is not a gentleman?” Tommy hugged him.

“Story and problem of my life,” he said.

“I still find you to be a most wonderful guy,” Tommy assured him.

Bud suddenly remembered something. “I’ve got great news. Patches is getting released from the hospital at the end of the week and then he’ll go to a physical rehab center for a few weeks.”

“That’s great!” they both told him.

“But, the best news, Sandy,” he continued, “is that your father is going to let me permanently have that big, old, red hangar by the back runway for my flight and acrobatics school, and I’m going to be the one and only Swift cargo pilot for the company. I told him that Patches is his new traffic control man. One of the many jobs he’s had in his life was as an Air Traffic Controller in the Air Force.”

“Do you really think Patches will want to stay here with us?” asked Sandy.

“Sure. We’ve been talking about us settling down after another race season and starting a flight school anyway. He’s going to need a lot of specialty care and it might as well be here. He once told me he’ll be happy wherever I decide to go, and to tell you the truth I think he likes the two legged scenery around here.” Bud looked

lovingly at the pair of legs he preferred. Tommy looked down and noticed that she had a huge bruise on her upper right thigh and tried to cover it with one hand.

“Don’t do that,” Bud told her. “Perfection always needs one flaw to make it desirable.”

“Where will you stay,” Sandy asked.

“Can you make room for company here at the complex—I’m hope to bring the motor home and my plane over and stake my claim on that hangar for better or for worse. If it’s okay, I need both you girls to help me move.”

Bud poked his head into Tommy’s work area early one afternoon. She had just finished epoxying ceramic tiles to the inside of the combustion chamber to help control the electric arc from burning through the outer metal walls. He stood her shifting from foot to foot until she noticed him. He was anxious because he had just received a call from JJ’s lawyer saying they were sending the teen back to San Diego later that day to face charges for a series of small crimes that had led to his expulsion from his junior year of high school and his arrival on Bud’s doorstep in mid May.

“Can Sandy and I come with you? I know he’s holding it against you and us that he was

arrested, but we would like to see him off.”

“Sure. Maybe he’ll talk to me if you’re there. Meet you both at the front gate in a half hour.”

“JJ, you have to listen,” Sandy was trying to reach out to him for the last time. They were standing next to the patrol car that was to take him to the airport.

“If my hands weren’t cuffed I could put my fingers in my ears and chant ‘ya-ya-ya-ya-ya’ and not hear you,” he told her.

“That’s up to you. I want you to know that you’re welcome to come back after your sentence is up and the courts let you travel. We can find you a job you would like to do or maybe go back to school. There are a couple of trade schools around here if you want to do something with your hands, or real schools if you want to do something with your mind.”

JJ would not look directly at Sandy but he did take a few surreptitious glances at her chest. *What did I ever see in that slob Portia Flagger*, her thought to himself making him feel even worse about his current situation. He was edgy and looked like he was ready to run if he could.

“Don’t you get it? My life is worth nothing. Sergey Levenkov or one of his Mob is going to get me! My days are numbered!”

“If you really believe that, JJ,” rebuked Bud, “why don’t you roll on him—at least you’ll have accomplishing some good.”

JJ told the police officer that he was ready to leave. The officer looked at Bud and shrugged her shoulders. After shoving JJ’s head down so he wouldn’t slam it into the doorframe, she pushed him into the back seat of the car. She got in the front seat drove off leaving the trio there in silence. None of them looked happy.

“Hey guys!” called out Haz jogging up to them. “Did I miss the goodbyes?”

“Yeah, Haz,” said Tommy, bitterly, “wave goodbye to the back of that police car.”

“Sorry, Bud. I didn’t mean be rude. I didn’t know he was leaving today, but that’s not actually why I showed up. I came over to watch the Flagger show.” They all looked at him questioningly.

“And here it is. Watch and enjoy, my friends. This should prove to be fun.” He pointed to a black limousine that had turned into the pick-up area. It stopped and the chauffeur got out, opened the back door and stood there waiting.

“Where is she?” growled a grumpy older male voice from the back seat.

“Coming now, sir,” replied the chauffeur.

Portia Flagger marched down the walkway, her head held high, not looking at anyone. She was stomping as she walked which only served to make her flabby body jiggle all over. It was not an intriguing or pleasant sight.

As she approached the car the voice demanded. "Portia, account for yourself! Now! I should have left you there, you dope fiend. You family name besmircher. You fat little moron! I hope you've learned your lesson."

"Yes, Grandfather, I have," she squeakily replied as she squeezed her body into the back of the limo. The driver wasn't letting the door open any farther than half way. "Do you know who is standing out here? It's those Swift women and that horrible Samson guy."

"What? Harrison, why didn't you tell me? Get us out of here before he comes over here and pokes his grinning face into the back of my car!" the voice demanded. Before Harrison could close the door, Haz grabbed it, pulled it open and peeped inside.

"A. Flagger, old man, how incredible to see you again," Haz was all smiles. "And, alive. I'd have thought your little Russian friends might have killed you by now. Evidently you aren't important enough for them to bother. Still, you'd better watch your back," and he slammed the door right out of the chauffeur's grip.

Haz looked at the driver and said. "If I was you I'd start looking for a new job. I don't think this one will last long." He handed Harrison his business card. "You might even just leave them now. I'll gladly pay you for whatever time you've spent with that old bastard today."

"Driver, get us out of here! You hear me?" Portia's voice was heard yelling and she started to hit the window with her fist.

"Thank you, sir." He tipped his hat to Haz. "I think I may drive them out of town and leave them there." He smiled, got into the car and drove off.

"Was that wise, Haz," asked Bud.

"Wise... no, but it *was* fun." The smile on his face remained there all day.

"What was she doing here?" asked Sandy as they watched the limousine drive off.

"She is one of the more un-bright of the Flaggers. Believe it or not she tried to buy marijuana from an undercover cop. Just a block from here. She even pulled up in her limousine. Talk about stupid! That driver is still in there," and he pointed to the police station. "As for poor Harrison, no matter what he does, this was his first and probably his last day with A. Flagger."

Chapter Seven: PHARC Jet

“Tommy, are you ready? It’s show time,” called Bud from the top of the jet engine test pit. After a long two months of constant work, Tommy’s new engine was ready for prime time. A magnetic containment field held the tremendous heat at bay so that it didn’t burn through the combustion chamber. Tommy also figured out a way for the engine to supply its own electricity once it had been started.

A dozen aircraft engineers and executives from various companies, a few Swift employees, and Mr. Swift were watching Tommy in the pit.

She waved to them all and called up, “Be there in a minute. I just need to connect the fuel line.” When she was done, she double-checked all the fittings and wiring. Satisfied, she joined the rest of the people on top of the pit.

“Do we need to go into the blockhouse for this, Tommy?” inquired Mr. Swift in a whisper into Tommy’s ear. He ultimately had little success in keeping his Arc Jet from exploding and feared the worst for hers.

“No, sir. It’s been fully tested. I want these people to see the jet working for a few minutes and then look it over to see that there are no tricks. Sandy is videoing the whole procedure so

we can send out copies to people who couldn't be bothered to attend this demo."

"What fuel are you using? I never received an invoice. And, why the P-H in the name?"

"You'll find out, sir. Just wait and see."

"It's your invention, so crank that sucker up, as the kids say!" and he stepped back to the side.

Tommy stepped up to the control panel and faced the crowd. "As you can see, much of this jet is not in its casing. Obviously we need to contain the turbine blades so things work, but the entire middle is exposed so you can examine it later and see the changes I made to the engine. You probably can see all the wiring around the air compressor turbines. I'll tell you now that it's part of the self-sustaining electrical system and also functions as the start up motor and powers the fuel compressors. It is partially used as an air compressor and that's to help keep the fuel moving in the right direction."

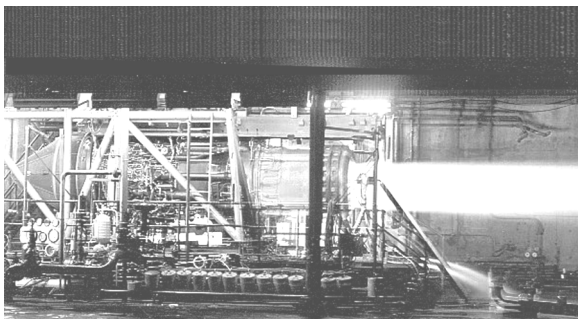
The assembled crowd looked restless. They came to see the engine, not discuss it.

"There are only two external components to this jet. One: the fuel source. Two: a battery bank that runs only for the first minute. This motor will supply all the electrical needs for the plane once it's running at three thousand revs."

Tommy let that sink in for a moment before

she turned and flipped one switch. The turbine slowly began to spin and gather speed.

“That switch sends battery power—just a mere 24-volts at one amp—to the wiring on the outside of the turbine, and that starts the blades to spin. All the tips of the blades contain proprietary magnets that pass by coils of fine wire windings in the cowl. Put electricity in and it’s a motor. Stop feeding it and it’s a generator. Right now the initiation system is heating up. Once it hits two thousand degrees, Fahrenheit by the way, not Celsius because that would be waaaaaayyyy to hot, the jet will fire up automatically.” She paused.



“That too hot for an initiation system,” a grumpy voice said.

“If this were a standard jet engine then two things: One, we wouldn’t have bothered asking

you to come here, and two, it is, but I'm starting a plasma arc." Tommy was watching their faces.

"Listen, girl, you don't need a plasma field to fire up a jet engine. That's just insanity talking." The unnamed man laughed at her and quipped, "This is all a waste of time. She's young and a woman and doesn't know what she's doing. I'm out of here before that thing blows her up."

As he started to leave Mr. Swift spoke up loudly. "Mr. Hastings, please stay. I assure you that you will not get hurt as long as you apologize to Thomasina. Otherwise, you can see that red-faced and very burly young man advancing on you... He will take exception to your words and do you a mischief. Besides, you may be pleasantly surprised by this."

Hastings blanched and paused for a second but, seeing Bud nearing him, decided it was best to apologize and stay.

"Sorry, Miss. Please call off your ruffian friend. For old times' sake, Damon, I'll stay." The look on his face told another story.

Mr. Swift nodded his thanks.

A loud *VROOM* came from the jet and a twenty foot long blue after burner-like flame shot out of the back. It widened for a second and then tightened up and lost most of its color. The hot exhaust was vented up and out of the pit by a large bore concrete duct that went out fifty feet

before turning upward and exiting out a heavily grated hole. This had been hinted at on page 19, by the way. You should have seen it coming.

The crowd—including a still hesitant Mr. Hastings (until he saw Bud's face again)—cheered at the success of the jet.

Tommy was pleased, so she continued. “The plasma is kept from touching the combustion chamber by a magnetic field, and the heat is kept from the walls by a layer of ceramic tiles. The compressor is now rotating by the thrust of the exhaust. It's all in perfect balance, just add more fuel and you get more thrust.”

There were no questions, just astonishment.

“Now, for the real reason this jet engine is so radical.” Tommy held up a red fuel can, poured some into small glasses and passed them around. As the engineers sniffed and tried to determine what the pale yellow fuel might be, she filled a glass and, clearing her throat to get their attention, drank it.

Several of the men tried to rush to her side for they thought she was trying to kill herself. She waved them off.

“I guess I went a little overboard on that. But, the fuel for my PHARC jet is mostly water. H₂O, the most plentiful substance on the planet, plus a little something extra.”

“Miss? What *does* PHARC stand for?” one of the engineers asked.

“Personal Hydrogen Arc. The P actually means pee. It takes about one gallon of human pee to each thousand gallons of water to make this thing work. If every airport diverts the drains from their urinals, that will be more than enough to do the trick. Now, as to how it works, the plasma field tears the water’s molecular structure into its component parts—two hydrogen atoms and one oxygen atom—and burns them. But, it needs just a bit more hydrogen and a few other key elements that happily come out of every human on this planet. Separately everything likes to go boom in a small way, but together the engine works miracles. The only drawback is that the energy from my fuel is about ten times less dense than JP-6 jet fuel.”

At least two of the visitors who had decided to taste the ‘fuel’ after Tommy had were now retching as they found out what the special ingredient was.

“How low?” someone asked finally.

“To be honest, gentlemen, from four engines running at peak efficiency, expect speeds of no more than four hundred and eighty miles per hour on a passenger jet.” Tommy waited till their rumbling subsided.

“The ball is in your playing field. What do you want for your customers? Speed and high cost with little profit? Or cheap operating costs and high customer returns with excellent profit even if it is a little slower?”

All of the attendees glanced at one another, trying to gauge what their answers should be.

“On an average trip of five hundred miles,” Tommy continued, “the flight will last an extra half hour. That covers most domestic routes and you can toot your horns about being the greenness fuel consumers in the world. Well, when I say ‘green,’ I kinda mean yellow, you know?” Tommy shut the jet engine down.

“Please give us ten minutes while things cool down and then you can all examine the jet. Miss Swift will be your go-to person.” She smiled at them.

“Thank you for your time, and good afternoon, gentlemen.” With that, Tommy left the control console and walked over to Bud. “Get me to the blockhouse fast before I puke!”

He grabbed her by the arm and rushed her away. Fortunately, nobody heard her vomiting from behind the control building.

“Sorry, Bud,” she told him as she stood up. “I’ll buy you a new pair of shoes tomorrow!”

An hour later they were back. Only Mr. Swift, Mr. Avery, Haz and Sandy, who had an assistant take the engineers back, remained.

“Sorry,” Tommy apologized, “I had a sudden attack of nerves. I hope I didn’t spoil things.”

Mr. Swift took both her hands into his. “My dear, you were just fantastic. I don’t think those gentleman even missed you. Now, give me a hug.”

She looked at him. “You sure about that. You remember the last couple times, don’t you?”

He smiled. “I most certainly do!” She hugged him for about ten seconds and then quickly stepped back shaking her head and tutting at him.

He had the decency to blush, slightly.

“So you think they’ll buy the Arc Jet, sir?” Bud asked.

“If they don’t, I’ll start manufacturing small jets to put them on. That’ll get the word out. Then, we’ll make the hesitating SOBs pay a premium over what we might charge them if they adopt early on. This invention of Tommy’s is fantastic. It will be a new cornerstone in this company’s offerings.”

“Thank you, sir, for your confidence.” Tommy was beaming at Bud.

“And, thank you, Tommy, for the hug. Oh,

and the engine, of course! And please call me Damon from now on. We are colleagues as well as blood relatives.” He was all smiles.

“No, sir!” Tommy was not accustomed to workplace familiarities such as that. “I could never call you Damon! How about Uncle Damon?”

“Of course, my wonderful niece,” and he gave her another little hug. She extricated herself before it became embarrassing.

“Daddy!” exclaimed Sandy as she reached out and took Tommy’s hand, “tell her!”

“Tell me what?”

“Yes. Tell her what, Sandra?” he teased her.

She stomped her foot causing a jiggling effect that made Mr. Avery hold his breath, and said. “What we talked about last night!”

“Oh, that. Of course, my dear.” He turned back to Thomasina. “Tommy, are you still living at the hotel? And, are we still paying your per diem to house you there?”

“Yes, Uncle Damon. And, yes. It may not be much but it is clean and private for any time I wish to entertain,” and she glanced at Bud.

Damon nodded. “You’ve been to the house and seen the guest quarters. How would you like to move in there? You’ll have your own entrance, privacy, pretty good sound-proofing,

and a way to the main house when you want to be with us...”

Before he could continue she threw her arms around both of them and with tears in her eyes replied. “I’d love to!”

“You make me a very happy old man!” he said, sighing at the thought of even more hugs from his wonderful niece.