

Tom Swift To The Rescue

By Thomas Hudson

A short story about Tom coming to the rescue of his wife and sister when they are mysteriously kidnapped while enjoying a simple day at the spa.

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Prologue

AS HE WORKED on his latest project, the young inventor lost track of time. It wasn't until nearly eleven before he was jolted out of his thought by the soft sitar music he used as his ring tone for calls from his wife, Bashalli.

"Tom Swift," he answered not recognizing the caller ID.

"Mr. Swift? Oh, god. Oh, Mr. Swift. This is Elise at the Moore Day Spa. Oh, gee. I don't know what to do. I've called the police and all, but—"

"But, what?" Tom demanded the blood draining from his face.

"They came in and sprayed us with something that knocked me out. Three huge men. When I woke up I had a really bad headache, and when I staggered into the back... Oh, golly! They're gone! Your wife and her blonde friend *were just not there!*"

Chapter 1 / The Disappearance

TOM AND BUD were frantic on learning their wives—and Tom's forthcoming baby—had seemingly been kidnapped. Bud raced over from his office in one of the outlying hangars at Enterprises while Tom contacted Harlan Ames in the Security office to get his team going.

After the dark haired flyer swung into Tom's silver convertible and they headed for the main gate, he asked, "Do we know anything?"

Tom shook his head as they left the gate, turned to the right and headed at top speed toward Shopton.

"Not a thing other than what little the woman at the spa could tell me. Three men, all of the extra-large variety barged into the front reception area, sprayed some sort of knock-out gas and when the receptionists woke up, something like just five minutes later, Bash and Sandy were not there!"

The drove in silence for a few minutes. Tom's TeleVoc beeped inside his head. His newest version of the communicator still used brainwaves and a computer simulation of the wearer's voice to send messages that could only be heard inside the brain of the recipient, but advances in miniaturization and battery power now meant the range had been extended by up to twelve miles.

He reached up and tapped the device magnetically attached under his collar and subvocalized, "Answer."

"Tom, it's Harlan. You are cleared for top speed to downtown and the salon. You will be picking up a police escort as you get to the city limits. They've got the way cleared, and I'm also on my way."

"Thanks, Harlan, and we are just coming up on our escort. They're taking off at high speed to stay in front of me. Any other word? Bud and I are frantic for information."

"I can guess that," came the reply, "but we have nothing. There are surveillance cameras in the ceilings down there, but not in any of the treatment rooms. By the time you arrive the police ought to have the camera footage ready to view. If you can wait an extra five minutes I'd like to be in on that."

Tom sighed. "Sure. We'll wait, but just five." He tapped the TeleVoc again and the call disconnected.

After telling Bud of the lack of any news he focussed on his driving. They were passing intersections at what might be considered an alarming rate of speed, but one of Tom's great skills, other than piloting, was in driving. On several occasions that skill had saved his life.

They came to a screeching halt next to a semi-circle of police cars at the entrance of the day spa. Both young med leapt out and ran to the door where the officer recognized them and opened it so they could go in.

Chief Slater was standing there, waiting for them.

"Okay, now before you hit me with a flurry of questions, we know almost nothing more than the young woman over there, the one who called Tom, could tell you. And, with Harlan coming I'd rather we all just stayed out here for a few before we go to the manager's office to view the video."

Tom and Bud's looks of dismay tugged at his heart, so he told them, "At least I can report there is no apparent sign of a struggle or of any physical attack. Our best guess right now is the same gas used to knock out the staff was used back there and the ladies were carried out. They isn't even

any sign of things getting disrupted on the shelves out here, so they must have been picked up and carried."

Tom had a sudden vision of Bashalli being tossed over one of the thug's shoulders right on her belly. He winced and the Chief asked what was the matter.

Tom told him, and the Chief patted him on the shoulder. "It really doesn't look like these men were in a huge hurry, so my guess is they were not heavy-handed. But, we'll know once we see that video— oh, and there's Harlan."

When the Security man entered Chief Slater simply turned and made a "follow me" motion. The four men walked briskly through a door, across what was apparently a relaxation and waiting room with a central fountain, and through some curtains to a hallway. They turned to the right and seen walked into the office.

The manager, a plump woman, was sitting there in tears.

"I try and try to make this a good and safe place, and then this happens!" She turned her face to Tom. "Oh, Mister Swift. I don't know what to say."

Tom nodded. "Unless someone warned you there was no way to foresee this. Can we please see the video now?"

She turned to her desk and tapped the ENTER key on her keyboard. The monitor on her desk showed them the front room of the spa.

"The system takes a frame every half second, but it is high-definition and all digital," she explained. "I've gone back to a point about two minutes before those horrible men entered. See?" She pointed at the picture where the two desk attendants seemed to move in a jerky way. Then, a shadow outside in the bright sunlight heralded the arrival of a large vehicle, possibly a van from the amount of

shadow it cast up to the glass doors.

Ten seconds later one man shoved the door open spraying something from a silver tank as he walked up to the desk. Within a second or two at most, the two women slumped onto the desk, obviously unconscious. He walked calmly back to the door and motioned his compatriots. The other two came in wearing small gas masks which everyone now could see the first man also wore.

The three crossed the room disappearing from sight as they would have come through the same door Tom and Bud had.

As they waited, Harlan mentioned, "We can get their height, size and approximate weight by measuring them as they each pass that shelf of body lotions out there."

Chief Slater turned to one of his men at the door and ordered him to do it.

Now, in what would have been less than two minutes real time, the first of the men could be seen coming back into the reception area. Tom breathed a sigh of relief on seeing it was Bashalli and that the man had her gently cradled in his arms and was being careful not to knock her into anything as he exited the spa.

With the doors open the camera now could show them the side door of the van opened and the man placing Bashalli onto the seat and buckling her shoulder harness.

Sandy, also carefully being carried, came out next and was set next to her sister-in-law.

Harlan was about to suggest that the manager send him a copy of the file when he got a huge smile on his face. So did Tom, Bud and Chief Slater.

"Did you see that?" the police chief asked.

They had. Two of the men had foolishly removed their masks and for two frames the camera had gotten great, clear images of their faces.

"I already notified Chief Rock of the State Police to cordon off the area and close all roads out of Shopton," the police officer told them. "Now, with shots of at least two of the three we can check every vehicle trying to leave. We'll get 'em!" he promised.

Tom and Bud looked at each other before the inventor asked, "We can't just sit around waiting for you all to get our wives back. You know that, Harlan, as do you Chief. But, I realize you would prefer to have us out of the way, so if someone can tell us just what make and model that van is, Bud and I will go back to Enterprises, get into one of our Whirling Duck helicopters, and scour the area from the air."

The Chief was about to protest when he caught Harlan's eyes. The Security man gave him a warning look that hit home.

"Uhh, well, that is, I guess your assistance from up there will be appreciated, Tom. You as well, Bud. Uhh, do you recognize that model, Harlan?"

"I'm fairly certain from the side door and how it disappears inside the body rather than outside as it slides open, that it is one of those newer Ford models. I think they're called the Espacioso which is, in case anyone wonders if high school Spanish stuck after all these years, means *spacious*. Ought to be easy to spot from the air because although we can't see it in this video, the top of the van features a solar panel taking up the back sixty-percent of the roof to help recharge the battery pack. It's a hybrid van!"

"Come on, Bud," Tom said as he headed to the door.

"We'll monitor and report on police channel three, Chief."

A moment later both young men were gone. Thankfully, the two women at the desk were still giving statements so the boys didn't have to bear more apologies.

Hopping back into the convertible and making a u-turn, Tom told his friend, "I'm very relieved to see that those goons didn't just toss the girls into that van."

"Yeah. I was a little surprised. Happy, but surprised. It's almost like they were being gentle. But, as you said, that's good. What do we do if and when we locate that van?"

Tom made a sharp right corner before answering.

"If they are on the move, we report and follow. If they are parked then I'm inclined to drop in on them, but I'm positive Harlan would tell me that's the dumbest think we could do. Bottom line is, I don't know."

Chapter 2 / The Search Begins

THE GATE GUARD had already been informed about the situation so he waved them through without the standard ID check. It was a formality anyway in the case of most of the Executive staff, of which Tom, as the son of Damon Swift, the owner, Board Chairman and CEO of the company, obviously fit that description.

They made an almost immediate left turn onto one of the marked vehicle lanes on the broad expanse of tarmac that ran along most of the western side of the four-mile-square facility. Their destination was the collection of nearly a dozen large hangars where all the aircraft were kept when not in use, or serviced when necessary.

Pulling up in front of the same hangar where Bud's small office was located, Tom was pleased to see that one of the newest models of his Whirling Duck sat, warmed up and ready for them.

This version featured two counter-rotating three-blade rotors mounted at fifteen-degree angles from straight up and intermeshing with each other. Both rotors were about thirty-five percent less wide than if the helicopter had to rely on a single set of blades. In addition, at the back and mounted to a stubby tail section, was an additional propeller for forward push.

Based on Tom's multi-peller technology, this one had eleven shorter blades mounted to a hub. Each blade had a small angled tiplette to keep usable airflow from simply being flung out; now all the air flowed backwards giving the four-man helo a flight speed of nearly 225 knots.

Tom and Bud climbed inside and closed their doors. As Tom checked over the instruments, Bud was putting on his

headset.

He took the controls while Tom did the same and they were heading skyward within a minute of arriving.

"Want to check all the roads heading out of Shopton?" he asked as the helo leaned to the left before straightening out and climbing as they scooted forward.

Tom nodded. "Yes. At least for starters. While we're here lets swing around one-eighty and cover the south road along the lake."

Bud pushed the stick to the right and the helicopter leaned over on it's side making a tight turn. As he brought them level again, he asked, "How far down do we go?"

After checking his watch and doing some mental arithmetic, Tom replied, "Unless they wanted to get the attention of everyone, they wouldn't have headed south until after we passed any place they might have been hiding on our way in, so that means they would only have about thirty-six minutes of travel, and that road is pretty twisty and in bad condition, so I'd say we go just about fifteen miles. That means to the bottom of the lake and to Pottersville. We can be there in three minutes, make a big swing around the town and check to make certain the entrance to the freeway nearby is guarded, then head back up eighty-seven until the Shopton exit."

When they arrived at the small town of Pottersville, site of the transfer rail yard for the shipments of Swift Motorcar Company vehicles, where they overflew the entire town of three hundred and its single freeway entrance inside of one more minute.

They spotted no sign of any van, much less the van they were searching for, so Bud swung them north and followed the freeway until it was time to turn off to go east to Shopton. The State Police had that entrance blocked and

the officers, leaning on the hood of their car, looked up and waved.

But waggled the body of the chopper, the helicopter equivalent of wiggling the wings of an airplane.

He slowed them to a nearly a crawl as they came to the first homes just outside of town. One of them, the old Thurston manor, sat on a slight rise. It had been abandoned when the last of the family had moved and no new buyer had been found willing to pay the overpriced amount the family wanted for it.

"Wouldn't it be odd if those goons were hiding out in that mansion or one of the other empty places around here?" Bud asked, almost to himself, but loud enough for his microphone to transmit it into Tom's headset.

"Odd, but entirely possible, Bud," he responded. After a twenty minute tour of each of the streets of Shopton, Bud headed north on the same lakefront road they had followed on their southern leg. This not only led out of town but it also led to the Shopton Regional Airport, a small one-runway airport capable of smaller aircraft only.

They only flew far enough to get to the next point where the van might have entered the freeway, and still saw nothing. So, Bud turned them to the west and headed to the small town of Thessaly. Smaller than the recently burgeoning Shopton, the town sat next to its own, also much smaller, lake.

But a quick look told them the van would not have found a hiding place in the village that mostly featured on street parking and a few carports they easily looked into.

They opted to flay down the zig-zag dry river bed that reached as far north as the village of North Hudson and was the primary drainage form a nearby Lake down into Lake Carlopa by Shopton.

At this time of year it was still slightly muddy-looking, but there was no sign of running water.

As the helo weaved back and forth Tom finally put one hand on Bud's forearm.

"And, that's enough of that, Let's head back and go over Shopton again."

Grinning, Bud brought them level and turned to the southwest on a direct heading for downtown Shopton.

Tom keyed his radio mike. "Tom Swift in Enterprises' helo one calling Shopton Police."

"Go ahead, Mr. Swift," came the response. "This is Shopton PD Dispatch."

"We haven't heard anything from you folks for the past hour. Is there anything to report?" Even Tom knew his voice had risen half an octave and he sounded desperate.

"Well, not right at the— hold on. I've got something coming in..." and his radio went silent.

The two men looked at each other, tension apparent on their faces.

Bud set them into hover about a thousand feet above the City Hall block. He knew the steady thrumming of the downwash of the blades would gently remind anyone in the building there was someone above them waiting for information.

And, two minutes later it came.

"Mr. Swift?"

"Tom here."

"I have Chief Slater coming to the communications room. Just hold a sec..."

About thirty seconds later, the voice of the police chief

came over their headphones.

"Tom? I'll assume Bud Barclay is up there with you. Can you please move to the side. It's like being inside a kettle drum. Anyway, that's not what I wanted to tell you. We have some good news. Well, partially good, that is."

"Tell me, please, Chief, and Bud is maneuvering us higher so you won't get so much buffeting."

"Fine. So, we just got a call from that day spa. They started getting phone calls about ten minutes ago. Nobody spoke for the first several, and then a young female voice gave a speedy address and hung up."

Tom and Bud's hearts raced with relief until they both realized that hearing from one female didn't necessarily equate to both their wives being on the other end of those calls.

"Have you traced them?" Bud asked.

"Far too short for the phone company to do a manual trace, but Harlan Ames is putting Enterprises' computers to the task. We should have some general location information in twenty minutes. I think he is going to call you between now and then."

Tom thanked the policeman and switched over to the Enterprises primary frequency. It was just in time for him to hear, "...you there, skipper? It's Harlan. Come in, please."

"Tom here," he answered. "We were just on the radio with Chief Slater. What have you found out?"

"We have a man, Phil Radnor, at the day spa and he took the most recent call. Before anyone could speak he had been told to ask if it was Sandy or Bashalli. It was your sister. All she had time to say was that she was free and hiding in some woods toward where the old fairgrounds

were. I've got three cars heading there but you ought to beat them in the Duck."

Bud didn't need to be asked. He swung the helo around and poured on the throttle for the rear propeller. They raced above the small municipal golf course and over several houses, including the Thurston manor on their way to the fairgrounds that had been abandoned a few years earlier in favor of a new facility donated to the city by the Swifts.

A swath of forest area about a half-mile wide and perhaps a thousand feet from front to back came into view.

"There!" Tom shouted, pointing.

Bud changed their course slightly and came to a hover above the forest area. Mostly composed of oaks and other leafy trees that had not fully come into bloom the two of them found it relatively easy to see to the ground. Bud moved them from side to side but it wasn't until they got to the overgrown parking area of the fairgrounds that they saw anyone.

"That's Sandy!" Bud whooped and dropped them down to land just a few yards from the blonde girl.

She walked over and yanked the back door open, climbing inside.

"Am I ever glad to see you two. Hey, Bud. Thanks for the flying rescue committee!"

Tom turned around and looked at his sister. He was happy for her safety but worried more than ever.

"What about Bash?"

She shrugged. "We were driving along Hoffman Road when they slowed for a tractor making a turn into a field and I jumped out. I wanted to grab Bashi's hand, but she was still buckled in. I'm so sorry, Tom, but I just ran." A

tear cascaded down her face and her lower lip trembled.

"Do you know where they are going," he asked, keeping his voice level; he knew shouting or anger would get them nowhere.

As the helo rose, she shook her head.

Bud headed at top speed for Enterprises where he touched down in the parking lot of the Dispensary. Doc Simpson and a nurse were waiting for them with a wheelchair. Sandy tried to refuse it, but she finally gave in and was whisked away to be checked out.

Chapter 3 / Old Thurston Manor

THE NEXT morning, and at Swift-Barclay's request, Bud phoned Tom and suggested he picked the inventor up.

"San's got a bug in her bonnet," the flyer told him, "about Bash. She thinks she might know where to find her. Got a brief text about twenty minutes ago. I'll tell you more when I get there."

Ten minutes later both Tom and Bud were in Bud's convertible speeding down one of the side roads into Shopton. As they entered the city limits the car turned onto a side street that wound around the far side of town, away from the lake. Several small hills in the area, and a lack of street amenities such as sidewalks, street lights and even painted lines on the road surface lent an air of run down ruralness to the area.

As they came around one final curve both could see the large house of one of Shopton's earliest wealthy families sitting atop its own small hill.

"There it is, skipper," Bud exclaimed as he slowed the car, finally pulling up to a tall iron gate that blocked the driveway. "The old Thurston manor. Same one we flew over yesterday."

Whether it was the rather spooky-looking house with its minarets and architectural details that made it seem more out of an old horror movie, or the sudden chill breeze that swept over the open-top car, both boys shivered.

Bud had, after Tom got in, filled him in on Sandy's text. It began with a simple "help" and progressed to a slightly longer message but no location information. Sandy had tried to use a GPS locate my friends application, but the phone at the other end had evidently been shut off.

"Then, just before I called you she got a quick audio message with this address but nothing more. Not even the letter B to say it was from Bash."

There were still reminders of his slash-and-burn logging techniques in that most of the hills around the town were devoid of the large oak trees that had covered the entire area at one time.

The boys got out and approached the gate.

"So, Sandy thinks it was from Bash, and this address, but no info about what me might be up against?" Tom asked as he reached for the door of the call box mounted to one side of the hinges.

"Nope! Just that she received a four-second whispered voice message on her cell phone. The last couple words included 'help and 'escape'."

"Escape?"

Bud shrugged. "That's what Sandy said. I listened to the message myself. Not too much more than that. It sort of sounds like Bash but the volume is so low, like she's trying to be sure nobody there hears her, that I cant' be certain."

Tom looked at the call box by the gate only to find that someone had vandalized the workings, and from the looks of it, months or even years ago. It was probably better to not announce they were out there, anyway. He pulled Bud to one side so they could not be seen behind the wall.

"Climb, or see if there's another way in?" Tom asked.

Bud reached out and pushed against the gate. It moved inward on well-oiled hinges. "That's not right for a start," he commented on the nearly silent swinging of the very heavy gate. "Old iron gates are supposed to grumble, groan and scream out if you even look like you are going to try moving them."

They walked up the driveway after mostly closing the gate. As they approached the five steps leading up to a wraparound porch and the front doors of the mansion, Tom put a hand on his friend's forearm, stopping them both.

“Do you find it a bit odd that there are no visible signs of occupancy here? Like no cars or flowers growing in those window boxes over there? No sign of the van, either.”

“It does seem a little like something of a set-up, doesn't it? Except, as I recall it has been empty for a year or more.” Bud replied. He pulled his phone out and speed dialed home. “San? Listen. We're here and the place looks deserted. If I don't call you again in ten minutes, get the police out here. We left the front gate ajar..... Yep! Love ya!”

Tentatively, they walked up the stairs—the eerily creaking stairs—and to the front door. Tom knocked. Inside, they could hear the sounds echoing in what would be a large entry room.

A minute later he knocked again. Another half minute passed before Bud reached out and gripped the ornate doorknob.

It turned in his hand and he pushed the door open.

“Again, I say this is spooky and feels all sorts of wrong,” the dark haired young man said.

Stepping inside but leaving the door open, Tom called out, “Is anyone here? Bash? Are you here?”

He looked around the room. As he had surmised it was large with a ceiling at least twenty feet over their heads. All the furniture pieces were covered with sheets of dusty cloth, but the floor looked freshly cleaned.

“Get out of here!” came a growling voice from an

alcove half way across the huge room. A menacing, tall and very broad man stepped into the room. He pointed at the door. "I said to get out! Go! You are not welcome here!"

To Tom's shock and dismay, Bud strode straight over to the man, chuckling. The inventor hurriedly walked over in case he needed to protect Bud.

"Hello, Mousie boy," Bud greeted the angry young man.

The man was at least six-foot-six—more than five inches taller than Bud or Tom—and must have weighed in at well above three-hundred pounds of what, to them both, looked to be muscle.

The other man looked down at Bud and growled. "Get out of here, Barclay, and take your brainy buddy with you."

His words seemed menacing but the way he delivered them was more like a young boy in a primary school play who had been given his lines at the last minute.

"You know something? I think you just might have been one member of a very naughty trio we say on very clean and clear video. Video the police have. I'd so hate to think that was you. Oh, and one other thing. I don't like being threatened, Mousie. Are you threatening me?" Bud asked holding out his right hand behind his back so that only Tom could see it. It was open, palm up.

"You must leave here, now," the large man told them, now looking over the top of their heads. "I have been told to make you leave."

Tom looked down to see Bud fold his little finger down and across his palm.

"That's one of five, Mousie. Say, Tom? Did I ever tell you about good old Mousie here? Say hello to Tom Swift, *Bradly*," Bud told the man.

When he made no sound, Bud continued. “*Bradly* here was on the Shopton High football team with me. Defensive lineman. Had a big growth spurt between junior and senior years and came back saying we were to call him Moose from that point on. He started being quite a bully about it until about a month into the season when one of the kids from the chess club walked up to him, announced that he didn’t like being bullied, and flattened old *Bradly* with a single punch. *Bradly* got up looking like he was going to cry and scurried away like a little mouse. Hence, Mousie!”

“Knock it off, Barclay,” Mousie said taking a step forward. “It’s Brad now.”

Tom noticed Bud’s ring finger fold down over his palm. “That is two of five, *Brad*.”

Returning to sounding like an ill-rehearsed young actor, Brad intoned, “You two are not wanted around here. We... uh, I do not know how you figured you needed to come here, but you must leave now.” His eyes that had gone back to focusing over their heads looked down into Bud’s eyes for a second before his gaze shifted around as if he were looking for something.

Tom checked to make certain nobody was sneaking up on them. The way to the front door was clear.

“Three, Brad. Three of five.” Bud’s middle finger joined the other two folded into his palm.

“Listen, Brad,” Tom said trying to smooth the situation, “we’re only here because Bud’s wife got a message from my wife asking us to come. That group of nasty men Bud mentioned took her and Bud’s wife yesterday. We have his wife back and now I want mine back. She is pregnant and shouldn’t be exposed to stress like being kidnapped. You can understand that, can’t you?”

Brad’s gaze flicked from left to right before going back

over Tom's head. "I must ask you to depart at this very instant," he said before a puzzled look came over his face. He seemed to be listening to something but finally added, "Nobody named Bash is here and she didn't call you so scram!"

Tom reached out and folded Bud's index finger over giving his friend's hand a little squeeze. Bud nodded, still facing away from the inventor.

Tom said, "Brad? I think my friend here would tell you that is now four of five. Do you understand what is going on?"

Brad's gaze softened and he looked down almost pleadingly at Tom, but he soon stiffened and, again, seemed to be listening to some inner voice.

"If you two do not depart in an instant then I will have to remove you by force." As if realizing what he had just said, Brad swallowed hard.

"And, that is five," the flyer said adding his thumb to the other digits. "Brad? Look up there," he said pointing toward the ceiling with his left hand.

As the giant tilted his head up to see what Bud meant, the newly-formed fist shot out connecting with the big man's jaw. The results were not what either Tom or Bud expected.

Brad's face turned back down and screwed up like a little child getting ready for a good screaming tantrum. But, before a sound could utter from his lips, his eyes rolled up showing nothing but the whites and he crumpled to the ground.

Chapter 4 / Effecting The Rescue

BUD WAS about to remark about the results when they both heard slow, steady clapping from above them. They looked up at the railing running along the back wall of the room. A man clad in what could only be termed “funeral director’s clothing” stood there, clapping at a rate of about one per second. On seeing them looking up, he stopped.

“Bravo. Very good show. Never saw that coming. Again, sir and sir, bravo!”

“Who the heck are you and were you pulling Bradley’s strings a moment ago?” Bud called upward.

“Ah, wait and see, young sirs. I shall be down shortly. Please wait for me. I guarantee your safety for the time being. At least until that lump awakes.”

With that, he pulled back and disappeared. Seconds later the hum of equipment could be both heard as well as felt. Then, a click came from the wall under the overhanging wall and both Tom and Bud stepped back in time to watch part of the wall near them separate.

“An elevator!” Bud hissed.

“Of course it is an elevator,” the mystery man stated as he stepped from the small cubicle. “About the only thing more modern than the addition of flush toilets to this monstrosity of a house in the early nineteen-twenties. There now. Allow me.” He held out his right hand, palm up, in which a pair of business card lay. Tom took one and glanced at it while Bud maintained a close watch on the man.

“Abner Carlyle Everton, huh?” Tom asked after reading the name. The initials were obvious but he doubted

the man would ever call himself “Ace.”

“At, as the saying goes, your service, Thomas Swift.

Now Bud picked up the second card and read it. “Thought so. You look to either be an actor playing the role, or are really in the bury ‘em business. Funeral Director and Mortician this says. Really?”

Their possible host bowed sweeping his right hand away from his body, telling them, “Yes. I am that precisely. And, I am the captor of Thomas' wife, Bashalli, who, I am afraid, is having a rather bad tantrum right now. I have forbidden her to leave the quite comfortable room I installed her in—one your wife would have shared with her had she not run off, Mr. Barclay—and she has taken exception to that. Kicked over a quite exquisite lamp and even went for my shins. I believe we also have some damage to the old lathe-and-plaster walls up there. *Tsk-tsk!* For golly wog sakes, she is twenty-five and ought to be beyond that! What would you do?”

He shrugged himself out of his black jacket and pulled the end of his bow tie to loosen the knot. With the coat and tie now removed, he looked more like any business man.

Moose moaned but did not open his eyes. A livid bruise from Bud's first punch was appearing on his chin.

“If you can hear me, young Bradly, I suggest remaining prostrate until your betters depart. Then I shall give you that crisp twenty dollar bill I promised, even though you did not dissuade our guests from remaining.” He looked up into Tom's eyes. “You see, after I found out your wife had sent Mr. Barclay's wife a message I took her phone and told Bradly here to stand guard downstairs while I had been keeping a watch to stop her from knocking out a screen and climbing down a drain pipe. Ah, listen,” he said cupping a hand to his right ear. “You can hear her feet scrabbling on

the tiles above the front entry. Come.”

He motioned Tom and Bud to follow. Opening the front door they were in time to see the first of two feet coming down a trellis. The shoes were impossible high heels that ought to have made such a downward climb undesirable if not impossible. As the knees appeared and then the hips, Abner Everton stepped forward and grasped the right ankle.

A little shriek came from above them and the legs tried to scramble back up, but the grip held.

“Come on down, Mrs. Swift. Your husband and Bud Barclay have come to rescue you from your *durance file*. At the very least come to face them and thank them for their efforts.”

A decidedly somewhat enlarged belly and a female chest came into view followed by a long neck and a pretty face complete with Bashalli's most recent short, dark, bobbed hairdo. Tom moved forward and took her into his arms. She began sobbing but he knew it was from relief more than anything.

"You okay?" he asked.

She nodded keeping her face buried in his chest.

Bud grabbed Everton by the shirtfront. "What's the meaning of this?" he demanded.

The man, seemingly with very little difficulty, removed Bud's hand and bent his arm behind him causing the flyer to begin to windmill the other one to maintain balance.

"Now, I shall let your arm go just short of doing permanent damage if you promise to behave yourself. Agree?" Bud nodded. "The man released his arm. "Good. then let us all go back inside and see of our young Bradley had awakened. Then, it will be refreshments while we wait

for the police to arrive. You did ask your wife to call them should you not be back in contact in, what was it? Ten minutes? Oh, the microphone at the gate is working quite well."

They reentered the house, this time Mr. Everton closed the door behind them.

As they crossed the room all could see that Moose was trying to get up onto his elbows and knees. A moment later they all heard to loud "Ooofff!" and "Why did you kick me, Mrs. Swift?" from Moose.

"Because you are a terrible man and I only wish that I could give the same kicked to those other two who endangered my baby!"

Everton gasped. "B-b-baby? he stuttered. "As in you are pregnant?"

When she nodded he sank into a nearby chair. "Oh, for all the chances in the world, I had no idea. I was simply hired to facilitate a rather elegant and yet simple kidnapping and ransom for an acquaintance now residing in one of the state's maximum security prisons. Unfortunately, I owe him a rather large sum of money and thought this would be the proverbial cake walk to getting out from under that. Now, I shall probably go back to prison. I had no idea, dear, dear Mrs. Swift. Forgive me?"

"Why?" she asked pointedly.

"Why forgive me, or why did I do this?"

She thought a moment before answering. "Both. But start with why you did this and why Sandra and myself?"

Everton looked at the floor. "As I said, I own a particular man a lot of money and he 'found' a way for me to pay him back. He believes that you and Mrs. Barclay, nee Swift, ought to be worth a million dollars apiece for

your safe delivery back into the loving arms, et cetera. He sent two of his, umm, people up here but told me to engage someone particularly large and stupid—" he nodded toward the figure still on the floor, "—and that his men would bring some knockout gas with them. The van, by the way, is at the rear of the mansion and under a large tarpaulin. It is a stolen vehicle from, I believe, Albany."

He paused for more than a couple seconds, so Bashalli coughed and told him to continue.

"Ah, right. Well, while I remained at the wheel of the van outside the spa, the three of them went in and brought you two ladies out. At my insistence—and please stress this to the police when you make out the report—you two were handled with the veritable kid gloves. I gave instructions to all three to the effect that a single bruise would mean a negative report to the boss." He tried to smile but found no takers, so he continued.

"They did carry you both out gently and we strapped you in so you would not wobble about during the drive. We dropped the other two off and found an open garage in a house with a For Sale sign in it and remained there for a couple hours before coming here."

"And, that's when Sandy escaped?" Bud guessed.

Everton nodded. "Yes. And, after Mrs. Swift tripped up Bradley I ordered him to cease and get back into the van. We arrived here three minutes later and have been here ever since."

Looking at Bashalli, he added, "And I suppose I might hope that you will forgive me as you were never harmed, never even put into a situation where you might feel stress. And, of course it goes without saying that I would not have had them take you had I known of the pregnancy."

"But you would have still taken Sandra and held her for

your ransom?"

"A man has to have money to eat, and I like to eat," he told her. "If I had not followed through I am certain my teeth would have ended up down my throat."

Bashalli walked over to within a few feet of Mr. Everton and gave him a tremendous kick in his right knee with the toe of the right shoe she had located in the closet upstairs. Trying to stand after a few seconds, he found that it no longer would hold his weight and he sank back to the floor. He lay there moaning and rubbing the damaged area.

"You've broken the patella," he accused her. Now angry, he tried to get up again and she sent an equally fierce kick into his other kneecap.

The boys exchanged glances.

"Well, if Mousie tries anything guess I'm still good for putting him down again," Bud offered. "Bash has this Everton creep handled."

While they waited, Tom called the police to verify where they were and that at least two of the criminals were subdued.

After hanging up, Bud, Bash and Tom sat down on a covered sofa facing both Everton and Mousie.

"Are you really all right?" Tom asked.

"Yes. I believe so. Other than scratching my arm climbing down that thing outside I am hot harmed in any way."

"The baby?"

She smiled. "A little bothered and giving me a few kicks to remind me to take things a little more easy, but I am certain he or she is fine."

She told them about the parts of the kidnapping she

recalled. They varied only in a few details from what Sandy had already told everyone, but there was a slight difference.

"Before they came in I had just yawned and so I was sort of holding my breath when they sprayed everyone. I have seen many programs and movies where poison gas or ether or something is used and the more people struggle and try to breath the faster it works. So, I held my breath for as long as I could."

"How far did you get?"

"All the way outside," she proudly told her husband. It never totally put me to sleep so I could watch through my barely opened eyes where they were taking us."

"Here?" Bud asked.

"Not at first. We paused at a small house off of the highway just south of downtown where the other two large men got out. They went into a house saying they would 'lie low' for a few days." She was able to recite the street address which Tom placed another phone call to tell the police about.

They promised to dispatch a couple cars immediately.

As a couple sirens could be heard in the distance, she told her husband and brother-in-law that she had purposely not followed Sandy.

"I might have been able to run for a few yards but i did not wish to risk the baby," she told them. "Besides, as that one over there tried to climb out from the very back of the van, I tripped him and he landed on his back side on the dirt and did not run after her."

Mousie moaned as he rolled over on his back.

"You don't have to keep kicking at me," he exclaimed.

Bashalli rose and walked over to stand above him, but out of arm's reach.

"If I wished to do so, I would and could kick in your face. So, be still and do not speak another word. Am I clear?"

He nodded and she turned away to come back to Tom. His hand shot out and his fingertips brushed across her ankle, but could not grab it.

Slowly, Bashalli Swift turned back around. Her right foot rose and before Bradly could pull his hand back in, she stamped down on his fingers. Very hard!

As he howled and tried to protect them, she moved back. "You are not a very bright person if you do not mind the personal assessment," she told him before sitting back down.

The sirens were very near and soon they halted and a loud-hailer was employed ordering everyone inside to come out with their hands up.

Bud got up and walked to the door, opening it but stepping to the side before calling out in a loud voice:

"Does that mean just the two bad guys we've got in here and totally under control, or do you also want the rescuers and the victim to do that? She's pregnant, you know!"

Before the officer turned off the megaphone he said a rather rude word.

Footsteps came up the steps outside and five officers raced into the room.

As they stopped surveying the room, Bud said from behind them, "*Rat-a-tat-tat*, gentlemen. If this had been a real incident you might all be dead. Next time, try to do a bit better. Come on, skipper. Come on, Bash. Let's get back

to Enterprises and our real lives."

"Does this end everything? Are we free to go home?" she asked Tom.

Tom nodded noncommittally "I hope so, but let's get Doc to check you out first" he said as they headed for the front door.

"Worry wart!"