

CHAPTER ONE

"The first time I ever saw Khyla I was ten years old. She was fifteen at the time, and just as beautiful as she is today. We moved into the trailer park she was living in. At the time, my mother was between marriages and a rusty old trailer was all she could afford on her waitress' salary. Khyla's father was about as bad off. He broke a leg during a motorcycle accident that was ruled his fault, and lost his construction job because it was a non job related injury. He was pulling welfare, and they were barely scraping by.

"I first saw Khyla when I was walking to school. She was walking in the ditch beside the road looking for bottles and cans to recycle. Although her jeans were tattered, they were clean. Her haircut was raggedy, obviously a home job, but the tresses looked freshly washed. She squinted as if she needed glasses, but her eyes beamed as only someone who is truly loved can do.

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Honey/Dexter Goad/2.

I, who had always hated girls, loved her at first sight.

"I put my books down and helped her look. Her eyesight was such that she was sweeping a stick in front of her to ensure that she wouldn't miss anything. I suggested that she carry the bag and I look for the bottles and cans. We were pretty successful, and I carried the bag as we rushed back to the trailer park so she could get ready for school. She gave me a ride to my school on her bicycle.

"Despite our age difference, we grew really close. I loved her like a puppy dog while she regarded me as her closest friend. For a year we were inseparable. We collected bottles together, rode to and from school on her bike, went to movies together when we could scrounge up the money. We stayed the night at each other's trailers, I would sleep on her couch, she would sleep with my mom. In either case we would stay up late into the night, talking.

"Then her father was healthy enough to work again. He had had enough of Indiana. A friend of his offered him a job constructing sets in Hollywood and Khyla's father accepted. They would move to California immediately. I was devastated. When she told me the news, I ran away. She caught me five blocks later at the old train tracks that ran through Evansville parallel to Highway 41.

"Crying, I admitted that I loved her. She held me and stroked my hair. 'I won't tell you that you are too young.' She said. 'I won't say that with me at sixteen and you at eleven we are worlds apart. I won't tell you that you'll meet someone else and forget about me, or that you are too young to know what love is.'

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Honey/Dexter Goad/3.

She hesitated. 'You won't make me say all of that will you?'

She demanded.

"I raised my head bravely. 'No. I understand.' It must have been obvious that I didn't, because she tried again.

" 'I have to go with my father, Tom.' She stated.

" 'We can stay in contact.' I insisted desperately. 'Telephone and letters.'

"She rubbed my forearms affectionately. 'That would ruin any chance we have. We would become distant, grow apart. We would become mired in trivial details. No, I want to meet you again when we are both grown up. We will meet as adults, not strangers but not overly familiar with each other either.'

"We held each other until Khyla's father called out that the moving van was here. 'We will not write or call each other.' She repeated insistently. 'That is how people drift apart. They get bogged down in petty details. I don't care how you are doing in school or what happened in the video arcade. We will meet five years from now, right here, and our friendship will burn brighter than ever!'

"So we made a pact. Five years later, on August 12th, the day I turned sixteen, we would meet on those train tracks at dusk. Even if we had outgrown our friendship, we would meet there anyway, for the other. I swore, and then she swore. And then we sealed the pact with a kiss, it is still the sweetest kiss I have ever experienced. But before I knew it, she was gone. They moved away that same day. I have never seen her in person since, nor have we ever contacted each other via mail or phone." Tom Smith fell silent, his voice reflecting his sadness.

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Honey/Dexter Goad/4.

Sammy Wilder didn't break the silence. He was twelve, and could well understand the painful longing described by his best friend. They lived in the same apartment building and had been friends since Tom moved with his ill mother to Pomeroy, Ohio, last year. Tom's mother, dying of cancer, had wanted to live out her final months in the town she grew up in. Despite his obvious desire to remain in Evansville for the long awaited reunion with Khylla, Tom didn't argue because he would do anything for his dying mother. His mother passed away several months ago, he was now living with his uncle.

Tom Smith was six feet tall and already 180 pounds, little of which was fat. He kept his blond hair cut short, and he wore wire frame spectacles to counter his short sightedness. His blue eyes were usually quick to show amusement but lately had showed melancholy more than anything else.

His friend was a foot shorter and much more slender. Sammy always wore jeans and tee-shirts, and kept his jet black hair shoulder length. His green eyes were soft and did nothing to reflect that this boy wasn't the pushover he looked to be. Sammy was the hardest, strongest willed person Tommy had ever met. Despite that, and despite the age difference, they were the best of friends. Sammy's parents were long deceased and he had bounced from one foster home to the next. He had stayed with his current family the longest of any.

"So you are going back to Evansville to meet her." Stated Sammy.

"I have to. You understand."

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Sammy chewed on a thumbnail. He didn't look pleased. "Yeah. I understand. Evansville is a thousand miles away. How are you going to get there? You won't be old enough to drive for ten more days, and in any case your uncle never let you get a learner's permit."

Tom grinned mischievously. "You don't even consider the possibility of my uncle taking me, do you?"

"He agreed to take you?" Gaspd Sammy.

"Of course not. He's a punk. But we already knew that." He sighed. "I thought about hitchhiking. That's too dangerous and too hit or miss. I have only ten days to go 500 plus miles. I can't risk a long dry spell. No, I have a better plan. Think Sambo, what do Pomeroy and Evansville have in common?"

The younger boy pondered. "You've lived in both places?"

"Yes, but I mean physically."

"Hmmm. They're both small pissant cities?"

Tom shook his head. "No, Evansville is a metropolis compared to Pomeroy. The river! The Ohio River, Sammy. I can take my uncle's canoe and reach Evansville in seven days."

"You're crazy." Sammy declared.

"No, I have planned it out. It is 530 some odd miles by river, according to the map. I will travel during the darkest hours of the night, from 9 p.m. to 5 a.m., so no one will see me and try to stop me. Who knows what the laws or restrictions against canoeing on the Ohio river are, but if they can't see me they can't stop me. With the current going my way, I should be able to make ten miles an hour, which means eighty miles a night. Seven nights and I hit the beach in Evansville.

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Honey/Dexter Goad/6.

I'm going tonight, so that leaves me three days for delays and problems."

Sammy crossed his arms over his chest. "What are you going to eat for seven days? Where are you going to sleep? What about showers and biological needs?"

Tom was amused. "You're such a practical man."

"One of us has to be."

"I have a little money for food, and I will bring some food as well. I will find hideaways to sleep the day away. When I need to use the bathroom, I will make do. And I'll probably stop in a couple cities and spend the day in a flea bag motel so I can use the modern plumbing. If I'm broke, the YMCA is another possibility. Anything else?"

Sammy dropped his hands. "Yeah, there is something else. I'm going with you. My foster parents will let me go, I'll make sure of that. You need help rowing so you will make better time. I've got a nest egg saved up. I've got a double sleeping bag we can use. And I'm your best friend, if you don't let me go, I'll never forgive you."

Tom laughed. "Hey, slow down. I want you to come. I'll be lonely spending every night on the river by myself. The only problem is your foster parents."

"I said I'll take care of it. They will let me go." His eyes flashed.

Tom shivered, despite the fact that he weighed a good eighty pounds more than his friend. Sometimes, the raw determination in Sammy scared Tom. "How can you be sure? Is something wrong?"

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Honey/Dexter Goad/7.

Sammy's face darkened. "My foster father is a bastard, let's leave it at that, okay? He will let me go."

Concerned, Tom advanced, taking his friend's hands. "Listen Sam. Is he making advances on you? You can tell me." He had never formally met Sam's foster parents. The only encounters were brief passing bys in the parking lot or the hallways of the apartment building. Sam had never allowed Tom into his apartment, nor had Sam allowed a coincidental encounter with either foster parent last more than seconds.

The younger boy's eyes widened. "Where the hell did you get that idea? Jesus Christ! I'd cut his nuts off! No, he's a bastard, not a pervert."

Tom decided to let it drop. Sometimes Sammy held on to things with a tenacity of a pit bull. He would tell more when he was ready to. "Okay, I'll take your word for it, buddy."

Sammy seemed torn. "It's not exactly what you think--"

Tom raised a hand. "Hold it. Enough said on that subject. Go home, get your money and what else you will need and get back here before he gets home from work. Okay? It's two thirty now. Hurry back."

Comforted, Sammy nodded. "Okay."

CHAPTER TWO

Roger Clemmons had been Sammy's foster father for almost a year. During that time he had become increasingly infatuated with his foster child, and in the last couple weeks the midnight sessions started happening. Despite what Sammy thought, Roger wasn't fooled by the sleeping act. He knew when someone was awake and when they were asleep.

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Honey/Dexter Goad/8.

The fact that Sammy was awake while pretending to be asleep made it more exciting.

He decided to skip work today because the summer was almost over. Soon, Sammy would be back in school. With school and running around with that dreadful Tom Smith, Sammy would hardly ever be home. Now was the time for action.

Roger Clemons was a large man. Six foot, three hundred pounds. Much of the weight was fat, but some muscle remained from his days as an offensive lineman in high school and college. He was too small to play at any college better than Northwestern, and in his four years at the Illinois college he walked off the field a victor only three times (In the fashion his luck went, Roger played there when they were dreadful, before they won the Big Ten in '95) and not at all his last two years. Perhaps part of his inferiority complex came from the fact that he was on such a steadily losing football team. Had he gone on to the pros and been drafted by the Tampa Bay Buccaneers, Roger probably wouldn't have had the confidence to walk across the street.

Roger's brown hair was graying on the sides, although he was only 36 years old. His wife, Ellen, a subservient nonentity, the only kind of woman he would marry, said it made him look distinguished. Roger thought it made him look like an old John Candy.

When the front door opened, Roger jumped up from the sofa, spilling his bowl of caramel popcorn in his haste. He heard sneakered footsteps go into Sammy's room. A minute later, rustling sounds began. There was a crash and a muffled curse.

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Honey/Dexter Goad/9.

It always amused Roger to hear cuss words issue from the adorable little mouth of his foster child. He hurried to Sammy's doorway.

The pubescent child was loading a backpack. Jeans, underwear, socks, tee-shirts, a couple towels and washcloths, soap, toothpaste and toothbrush, etc.

"What are you doing?" Hissed Roger balefully.

Sammy looked up, eyes huge. "I'm going on a trip. I'll be back in a week or so."

"The hell you are."

The child turned away, resuming the packing. In a moment the backpack was zipped up and ready to be put on.

Roger grabbed Sammy's shoulder and squeezed. "You aren't going anywhere ... Unless you think you can go through me."

Sammy jerked away and swung the backpack on. Now the bed was between them. "Fuck you! Goddamn bully."

The foster father giggled. "You are such a hot little bitch."

"And you're a sick fat bitch!"

That pissed Roger off. He could say what he wanted, but no one was going to call him a bitch. He leaped onto the bed and pounced. Sammy darted out of the way but not completely in time. As Roger bounced on the floor and against the wall, he managed to snatch an ankle, sending his foster child to the floor with him.

They both lay still, gasping. "Where do you want to go?" Roger questioned, buying time to recover his breath.

"Down the river with Tom."

"Hmmm. That should be real cozy. Just the two of you?"

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Honey/Dexter Goad/10.

Through his death grip on Sammy's ankle, Roger could feel the pulse go up. "You are a sick bastard. If you don't let me go, I'm telling on you."

Roger sighed. "You can go. After you do something for me."

"What?" Was the suspicious reply.

Roger rose to his knees, while maintaining his grip on the ankle. "Take off your jeans."

Sammy scowled. "If you don't let go of my foot, I'm going to kick you in the nuts so hard you'll be in a wheelchair for a month." Was the whispered threat. The free foot was hovering between Roger's spread legs like a cocked pistol.

The foster father froze for a second in indecision. Obviously, the thing to do would be to grab the other, threatening, foot. While that was occurring to Roger, Sammy took advantage of the hesitation to jerk the captured foot free. In a flash, the foster child was up and out of the room.

"Sammy!" Roger bellowed as he rumbled to his feet. "Sammy, come back here Goddamn it!" He sagged when he heard the front door slam shut.

"Fuck." He muttered. Then he considered something. Down the river, huh?

Sammy's face was flushed but he was beaming when he burst into Tom's room. "I made it. I sneaked in the dragon's lair, stole the treasure, and escaped unscathed."

Tom, amused, ruffled Sammy's hair. "Good job, squirt. How much money do you have? You got the sleeping bag and a full backpack, I see."

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Honey/Dexter Goad/11.

His friend produced some bills and coins. "Oh, about seventy dollars, including ten in change."

"Here's some ziploc bags. Split your money up into four of them and put one bag in each pocket. That way, if we get dumped in the drink, the money won't get wet, and loose change won't be falling out."

The younger boy followed the advice as Tom made sandwiches and put them in ziplock bags as well. "Meat and cheese sandwiches for the first day, then peanut butter and honey sandwiches for after on because they last longer. I'm bringing vitamins so we won't be tired all the time from eating bullshit. A couple packages of granola bars and some cans of tuna and chicken that don't need can openers. That way we don't have to keep track of a can opener. All this, and money to buy one hot meal a day. We will be fine. We will split our clothes and the food evenly between backpacks in case one is lost. The flashlight and Swiss army knife will be tied to my belt. Have I missed anything?"

"Toilet paper?" Chirped Sammy.

"I've got a roll. We can buy more as needed. Okay, when I'm done with these sandwiches, we'll have a hot meal and get rolling."

Tom's uncle usually got home from work around six thirty p.m. Tom and Sammy ate as much beef stew, corn, and applesauce as they could, took showers, and were gone with the canoe by six o'clock.

"Isn't this stealing?" Asked Sammy.

"Fuck my uncle. My mom gave him this anyway. He can have it back in a week."

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Honey/Dexter Goad/12.

They reached the Ohio River around seven o'clock and parked the boat in a grove of bushes. Sitting at a park bench, Tom removed the sandwich bag from a deck of cards. Sammy crushed him in poker for the next hour. Neither of them notice the red Dodge pickup truck cruise by and park a block down.

"You bluff too good, Sambo. I can never beat you." He put away the cards since it was getting too dark to play.

Sammy returned the huge pile of gravel he had won to the trail. "When do we push off?"

"Another half hour or so, when it gets as dark as it is going to. This first night will be rough, because we have been up all day. But after we sleep tomorrow morning and afternoon, we should be acclimated. Come on, let's stretch our legs while we can."

They walked along the river, clowning, throwing rocks. "I haven't told you the whole story about Khyla. There is more."

Sammy looked up questioningly.

"Think. Have you ever heard the uncommon name Khyla before?"

His young friend stopped walking. "Holy Shit! Are you serious?"

"Yes. Khyla Finn, movie star. When she moved to California I guess she caught the eye of some movie producer. I first saw her in a movie three years ago, when she was seventeen. I almost fell out of my seat. I couldn't believe it. She is very popular now, of course, and very rich. I have read every article about her. She has had some boyfriends, but no one serious."

"We saw her latest movie together! Last month!" Exclaimed Sammy. "I never guessed ... "

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Tom smiled fondly. "How could you have? Your next question is: Now that she is rich and famous, why should she come back to see me? It would be easy for her to rationalize that I have probably forgotten about her or moved away. My reply is: If I believed that, would I be going through all this to return to Evansville?" He shook his head. "She will be there, Sammy."

They strolled back to where the canoe was hidden. Roger appeared from behind the bushes as they pulled the boat out. "Stealing boats now, Sammy? Your delinquent friend has really gotten you into trouble this time."

Sammy glanced at a shocked Tom. "I'm afraid I let it slip that we were going 'down the river.' That was right before he tried to rape me."

Roger colored. "Now hold on--"

"Shut up!" Tom screamed. He had known it. Known somewhere in the back of his mind that things were this bad. The be vindicated felt awful. "Shut the fuck up, pervert!" He opened the biggest blade on his Swiss army knife. "If you try to stop us, I'm going to cut you. As bad as I can."

Embarrassed beyond reason, Roger charged. Tom stopped him short by slicing at his face. A gout of blood spurted out and soon covered the foster father's face like crimson tears. "My nose! You bastard! My nose's ... You cut my nose!" Bellowed Roger like a sick cow. He covered his face with two meaty hands.

Tom and Sammy lifted the boat and fled to the river. Roger, his chest soaked in red as if he had carelessly eaten tomato soap for lunch, cried after them. "I'm going to get you! Both of you! And before I kill you, Sammy, I'm going to *fuck* you!!"

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Honey/Dexter Goad/14.

Tom let out a crazy laugh as they hit the water. "He needs to be in a straitjacket. He really is insane."

"You cut his nose, Tom. You expect him to be happy right now?"

"I should have cut his dick, sick assed fag."

They settled in and started paddling as Roger, who was still yelling incoherently, charged the river. He looked like a cross between a water buffalo and a big red firetruck.

"No." Sammy replied wisely. "If you had done that you would have been no better than him."

CHAPTER THREE

They soon outdistanced Sammy's foster father, who tried to swim after them but only succeeded in turning the brown river water red. They even left behind his hoarse shouts within a half hour.

"Do we have everything?" Came Sammy's shaky voice after a while.

"Yeah. Backpacks, sleeping bag, paddles, knife, flashlight. I almost wet myself when your foster father came around the bush."

Sammy stroked the paddle a couple times. "I guess he went up and down the river until he spied us playing cards."

They were near the middle of the huge river. The current was taking them along nicely, augmented by their paddling. The main purpose of the paddling was to steer, but it also upped their speed by a mile per hour.

The mid summer air was cool and there was no wind. Both shores were, for the most part, vacant of life or lights. They passed under various sized bridges maybe once or twice an hour.

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Honey/Dexter Goad/15.

The starry sky, uninhibited by city pollution, street lights, or clouds; was brilliant and extensive.

"It's so beautiful out here. Look at that sky." Gaspd Tom.

Sammy agreed. "And so peaceful."

Suddenly, something occurred to Tom. "Sammy, I fucked up."

"How?"

"I forgot the most simple and most basic thing we need. Water! I didn't even bring a canteen."

Sammy grinned to himself. "I did. You forget, I've been camping before."

"You brought a canteen?" Tom exclaimed. "That's right! I remember seeing it when we evened up our backpacks. I could kiss you!"

"Don't get carried away."

Tom snorted. "I am getting carried away! By the Ohio River!"

"Ha ha. Don't buy a microphone just yet."

They paddled in silence again. Soon they could see the lights of a bigger city ahead. There were bright lights closed to the Ohio bank, illuminating over half the width of the river. Cars regularly crossed the bridge, and several people seemed to be drinking on one of the docks. They could see the cherry tip of a cigarette go from one person to the next.

"That's Gallipolis." Tom commented. "It's twenty miles from Pomeroy."

They were speared by the lights and obviously seen by the dock revelers.

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Honey/Dexter Goad/16.

"Hey kids!" A drunken voice bawled. "Whatcha' doin'?"

There followed throaty laughter.

"Out kinda late?" A woman added.

Another woman lifted her tee-shirt, revealing mountainous breasts "Come on kids! Stop and I'll show you a whole new world."

The canoe was only fifty yards ahead of the dock now, and would pass a mere twenty feet in front of it. Tom's eyes were glued on the blond bare breasted woman.

"Come on, kids." The woman groaned, sneaking a hand down to her crotch. "I'm sooo horny!" The others giggled crazily.

"They're laughing, but I think she's serious." Muttered Tom.

Sammy almost gagged. "Jesus Christ, Tom, she's a drunken slut! Can you forget Khyla so easily?"

"I didn't say we were stopping." He shot back.

They were passing the pier now. The shirtless woman's hand was down her pants now and her huge breasts jiggled. "Don't be cowards!" She groaned. "I need you bad!"

The other laughed wildly. One man threw a beer can as they went by. "Scared kids."

The can hit the side of the boat and sprayed them both, producing another round of laughter. Sammy sighed in disgust, Tom spit over the side.

"Beer. I hate beer."

"I kind of figured that they were drinking beer." Sammy replied dryly.

"Ha ha. You don't need a microphone either."

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The next major town was fifty miles further on, they might or might not reach it this night. For two miles neither boy said anything. Tom finally put aside his paddle. "Let's rest a spell and allow the current carry us."

"Okay." Sammy mumbled.

"Can I have some water?"

"Sure." The younger passenger handed over the canteen.

Tom drank and returned it. "You're pissed at me."

"I can't understand why you even looked at that drunk bitch!" Sammy replied savagely. "She was just teasing you anyway."

His friend turned and squeezed a sneakered foot. "Wait 'till you get a little older. You'll understand. You can look at one woman and love another."

"I'm old enough to know one thing. That is bullshit!"

Tom peered closer in the gloom. Sammy was only like this when he was scared or extremely upset. It was like Sammy felt Tom had been betraying him rather than Khyla, someone the younger boy didn't even know.

"I'm sorry, Sammy. I didn't mean to patronize you. I know how it is to be your age and not have anybody who respects your opinion. Forgive me?"

A hand snaked forward and squeezed the older boy's shoulder. "Of course. I was angry at those assholes, not you. I just tried to take it out on you."

Tom checked his watch. "It's almost midnight, we've been at this for three hours. Let's eat a sandwich."

They conversated about inconsequential matters over their small meal, both finding it a little difficult to talk while not

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Honey/Dexter Goad/18.

looking at each other. Tom was in the front of the canoe, Sammy in the back. For Tom to turn around would risk overturning the boat and was basically unnecessary. It merely took some getting used to.

The subject was how the hapless BENGALS had looked so far in preseason (Sammy adored the BENGALS, despite the fact that he had been two years old the last time they had been in the Super Bowl) when they were startled by a forlorn voice.

"Mowwie?" A fragile, feminine voice called out.

"Shhh." Tom whispered. "I don't think that is directed at us."

"Mowwie? Come home!" The woman called sadly.

Sammy swallowed. "Heck of a name for a cat."

"Heck of a name for a rooster!" His friend quipped back.

They slowly left the woman, whom they never saw but whom sounded close, behind. "Mowwie? Please come home! Mamma misses you!"

Tom shook his head as they rounded a bend and left her behind for good. "She sounded so lonely. I wish we could have stopped."

"I know. But charity starts at home. We can't be late for your date." Sammy countered wisely. "It's already August 3rd."

"Wha-oh yeah. It's past midnight. Let's get back to paddling."

"Sammy! Sammy!"

The boy jerked upright. "Oh! I guess I was sleeping. I'm sorry. I was so tired ... "

Tom glanced at his watch. "I was in a kind of semi-doze myself."

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Honey/Dexter Goad/19.

I was paddling but I wasn't really thinking, and I didn't notice that we hadn't talked for a long time. It's four o'clock. The last time we talked was about two thirty, I think."

"Uh, Tom."

"Yep."

"Where's my paddle?" Asked a tiny voice.

"It's not in the boat?"

Silence.

"I guess you dropped it when you dozed off."

"I'll buy another one."

"You're going to have to." Tom reprimanded. "We each need one. We haven't made good time. In fact, we haven't reached Gallipolis yet, and that is only seventy miles from Pomeroy. But let's pull over at these trees up ahead. There looks to be enough cover to spend the day there unbothered."

Sammy bit his lip. "Good, because I have to use the bathroom very bad."

"Hell, just go over the side like I did a couple hours ago."

"I don't remember you doing that!"

Tom shrugged. "It must have been after you fell asleep. I remember warning you that I was going to do it, and you mumbled something."

"Well, I'll wait until we land."

The elder boy was already maneuvering them to the bank.

"Suit yourself. There's nothing to be ashamed of. We are both young men."

Sammy didn't reply. Tom wondered if Roger had harassed the foster child in the bathroom or something.

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Honey/Dexter Goad/20.

There were people who were touchy about using the bathroom in front of anybody. Back in Evansville, Tom had a friend who could not use a urinal in a public restroom if anyone else was in there. He just locked up, no matter how bad he had to go. The boy couldn't explain it, he just froze up. Tom mentally shrugged, it was up to Sammy.

They landed on the Ohio side of the river, in the middle of a vast grove of trees. Sammy leaped out. "I'll be right back." And he was gone.

Shaking his head ruefully, Tom dragged the canoe out of the water. He concealed it in a dozen yards, from the river in a thorny bush. It was painted an olive green, so it blended in fairly well. The remainder of the perishable meat and cheese sandwiches and the sleeping bag were taken out, everything else would be left in the canoe.

Sammy was back, looking much less tense. "Man, that was killing me."

"Let's eat and turn in. I'm almost asleep on my feet."

It took longer to find a suitable place to sleep than it did to finish off the sandwiches. They finally discovered a slight depression that was blanketed by a large leafed bush. Tom spread out the bed roll and they crawled in.

"Good night, Tom Boy."

"Ha. Ha. Sambo."

They nestled together and Morpheas took them.

CHAPTER FOUR

Tom woke first. Sammy's face was buried in his chest, as if Tom were a teddy bear. The younger boy's arms encircled his waist.

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Honey/Dexter Goad/21.

He's still a child, Tom mused. Why the fuck did I bring him? But he knew why. It wasn't to get him away from Roger, although that was reason enough. It wasn't to get the sleeping bag or money, although those things were helpful. It wasn't that this trip was best made by two people, although that too was a good reason. Quite simply, Tom needed Sammy. He required the boy's courage, humor, toughness. This journey would have been hellishly lonely without Sammy.

He petted Sammy's hair fondly. The twelve year old stirred, looking up with huge eyes. "Wha-"

"Time to get up, Sambo."

Sammy glanced at his watch. "Wow, two p.m. already. We slept nine hours!"

"I was tired as a one armed ditch digger after a double shift."

They peeked around, spied no one, and got up. After taking separate calls of nature, they trekked back to the canoe. They washed up in the River, of dubious benefit considering the filthiness of the Ohio, and ate a quick meal of canned goods.

"We need to find someplace to refill your canteen and buy a paddle. I think I'll buy a canteen myself." Tom said as he led the way out of the woods.

They found a gravel road on the edge of the forest. "What do you say?" Inquired Tom casually. "Left or right?"

Sammy shrugged. "I don't care. I hope a mom and pop store is on it. I don't want to go into a town. We stick out like an afro in a Ku Klux Klan meeting."

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Honey/Dexter Goad/22.

Tom giggled. "Silly. Actually, we look inconspicuous enough, I think. Adults pay as little attention to teenagers as they can get away with."

His friend smiled. Sammy considered Tom an adult.

They went left. Three miles down they ran across a gas station. After the forty minute walk, both fervently hoped it had what they needed. It was a new building, painted in a clean white that was still smudge free. The windows looked freshly washed, the gas pumps gleamed. The asphalt surface appeared to be oil free.

A stocky red-haired man was sweeping out the two car garage, which was empty save for new and used tires stacked neatly against the far wall. The man wore blue overalls whose razor sharp iron lines and wrinkleless condition spoke of loving late night care. The man had a clean shave and smelled of a smooth cologne that had been put on expertly, not too strong or weak. His clear green eyes narrowed as he took the two in.

"Can I help you folks?" Beneath his polite voice his contempt was clear.

"Do you sell canoe paddles or canteens?" Tom replied respectfully.

The man regarded them for a long moment, inspected their smudged and creased attire, their half combed hair, their sleep sweat scent. After an eternity the man smiled a very unpretty smile. "Well, if it isn't the modern day Bonnie and Clyde." He winked at Sammy. "You had me fooled for a minute. But nobody can fool Simon Parks for long."

"What the hell are you babbling about?" Tom snapped.

(CONTINUED)

Honey/Dexter Goad/23.

Sammy grabbed his friend's arm. "Let's go. Fuck this punk."

Simon Parks laughed merrily. "Tom Smith and Sammy Wilder. Am I right? I can see by your expressions that I am. It's all over the TV. You're in trouble, boy." He confided to Tom. "Kidnapping, assault, maybe attempted murder."

"That's bullshit. That son of a bitch had the hots for Sammy, the sick bastard. Now he's lying to the police. And I cut his nose, that's hardly fatal."

Parks folded his arms over his chest. "Save it. How much will you pay me not to turn in you and your girlfriend?"

"Fuck you!" Sammy spit.

Tom shook his head. He couldn't believe this was happening. "We don't have very much money. Tell them what you want, we don't care." He backed away. "Come on Sammy."

Parks seized the younger boy and whipped a head lock on him. "Not so fast. This obviously isn't kidnapping. You two are in this together. Now, you try anything stupid, I'll break her neck."

The older boy froze in a half charge.

"Very good. Now fork over all your money. I don't care if you tell the police about this, they won't believe your trash word over mine. You two look like hobos." He added derisively. "We don't have all day! Give me the money, and you can have her back."

"Don't give him shit!" Sammy gasped hatefully, wringing under the strong grasp.

Tom frowned as he began pulling plastic bags of money. "Okay, I'll pay you. But you don't have to keep insulting him."

(CONTINUED)

Honey/Dexter Goad/24.

Sammy is more of a man than you are, I don't care how many times you iron your clothes every night."

Parks looked suddenly angry. He squeezed Sammy so hard the boy squeaked. "You need to learn some manners. Maybe I'll teach you some. Show you I'm more of a man than a twelve year old girl."

"Don't hurt him!" Tom begged, extending the bags of money. "Here."

But Parks was off on a tangent. "You keep saying 'him'! What kind of weird sexual games do you two play?" He sounded genuinely curious and less antagonistic.

"Do what?"

Sammy closed her eyes pitifully. "I'm a girl, Tom. Obviously, it said so in the news."

It was harder to tell what dropped lower, Tom's jaw or his arms. The bags of money fell from his loosened grip.

Parks was amused. "You didn't know? You didn't know??? I don't believe it!"

In his amusement and contempt for Sammy's abilities, the gas station owner relaxed his grip. The young girl snaked out of his grasp, whirled, and kned Parks in the crotch. "You big mouthed mother-fucker."

She cursed vehemently. She slapped him. "That's for telling him I'm a girl." A whop in the stomach. "That's for being an asshole." Another knee in the crotch, which drove Parks to his own knees. "That's for choking me." A punch in the nose, hard enough to draw blood. "That's for trying to rob us." A punch in the mouth, violent enough to knock him on his back. "And that's for telling him I am a girl!"

(CONTINUED)

Honey/Dexter Goad/25.

You fucking primping sissy assed dirty minded son of a slutting dog dick sucking bitch!" She stood over him, hands balled into fists, breathing heavily.

"Jesus Christ, Sammy. That's enough." Tom advised. He hugged his friend. "It's okay, buddy."

Sammy kicked Parks in the ribs. Both of them heard the snap. The semi conscious man groaned. "I guess I am more of a man than you, you snitching punk."

"That's enough!" Tom yelled. He softened his voice. "Okay?"

The girl sagged, seeming near tears. "Goddamn it. I can't stand it." She turned and fled.

Tom caught her just on the main road. "Sammy, this doesn't change anything! You're still my best friend! My only friend." He squeezed the arm he had captured.

Sammy met his eyes. "I've never been so angry in my life. I could have killed him."

"Let's go. We'll buy what we need in Portsmouth tomorrow."

They jogged away from the gas station after Tom recovered his money.

"Now we're really in trouble with the police." Tom muttered as they ran. He mused further as they slowed to a walk a mile from the gas station. "I don't think they are looking very hard for us. Roger knows which direction we went. How hard would it have been to canvas the river twenty miles down? They could have been in place at Gallipolis long before we passed there. Then again, I doubt if they expected us to go very far. They probably think we hit the riverbank a mile downstream. No one knows our ultimate destination."

(CONTINUED)

Sammy took this all in silently. She looked exactly the same as she had an hour ago. Shoulder length jet black hair, dark blue eyes, clear complexion, slender build, long and thin fingers, ragged blue jeans, loose tee-shirts, and basketball sneakers. But Tom's perception of his friend had changed now. He noticed for the first time that Sammy had long, delicate, eyelashes that really highlighted her blue eyes. He observed as well that his friend didn't have the cocky, strutting walk that typified most adolescent boys, she walked with a supple grace that held dignity, not disrespect.

"What the fuck are you looking at?" Sammy snapped.

Tom chuckled softly. "I was just thinking how stupid and unobservant I am. I've known you for a year and I never suspected."

"Just drop it, okay? Jesus Christ!"

He wisely did so. She seemed really touchy about it. He would give the wound time to heal. "You're in this with me, Sammy, so I have to ask you. Do you want us to turn ourselves in? The police are looking for us. We could get in a lot of trouble if we keep going. Meeting Khyla isn't that important."

Sammy stopped and met his eyes. "What do you want to do?"

"No fair, you'll go along with whatever I want. No, I want your unbiased opinion."

"I say we keep going. If we stop and clear up the misunderstanding, you are going to miss that date. After waiting five years, that would suck. We can turn ourselves in after you see her."

(CONTINUED)

Tom nodded. "That's what I think, too. I'm not going to let your foster father screw this up."

They went on. It was almost six o'clock when they finally sat down next to their canoe. Sammy rubbed her calves. "I haven't walked this much in a while."

"Ten miles, altogether." Tom agreed, uncomfortable as well.

Sammy seemed to realize that things would be tense between them until she explained herself. She sighed, heavily, then spoke. "Do you remember when we met? ..."

Tom had moved into the apartment building the day before. He was walking through the hallways, familiarizing himself with his immediate surroundings when he turned the corner and walked right into a fight. A small eleven year old boy was being pummeled by three larger boys. He fought back gamely, but was no match against the heavy odds.

Tom, furious, shoved the ringleader to the floor. "Jesus! Think you guys have a big enough advantage? Three on one?" He raged. He was only fifteen, but was at least a year older than any of the others. "You want to come at me three on one?"

One of the boys flew at Tom, who dispatched the assailant with two savage blows. "Next?"

The other two gathered up their wounded friend and fled.

The victim, who was struggling bravely to not cry, was beat up pretty bad. His mouth and one eye were already swelling, his nose was bleeding, and his bare chest and stomach were covered with welts and bruises. His shirt had been torn off him and was a tattered rag on the floor.

(CONTINUED)

Honey/Dexter Goad/28.

He breathed in painful gasps while regarding Tom with one good eye.

"You look like a dog caught in a hailstorm, son." Tom commented in a friendly tone. He ruffled the boy's hair. "You did all right considering those cowards were three deep."

"I wouldn't give them my lunch money. I told them to go stick a broom up their asses." The boy gasped. "They didn't like that."

"I can see." He chuckled again. "A man's got to stand up for himself sometimes. Women, like my mother, don't understand that."

The boy seemed about to object about something, but Tom cut him off.

"Girls got it easy." The derisiveness was plain in his tone. "They don't understand what a boy has to go through. Nothing against girls, you understand, but they just do not get it." He patted the younger boy on the back. "What's your name, boy?"

The boy hesitated, then produced a smile. "Sammy. Sammy Wilder."

"I'm Tom Smith. Let's go to my apartment and get you patched up. Don't worry about your shirt, it is through. I'll give you one of my old ones, so your parents won't see your bruises. I don't suppose it matters, though. Your face is a trainwreck."

"I had made up my mind to tell you the next day." Sammy explained. "But you showed up at my door with a basketball and said 'Come on, boy, let's shoot some hoops!' and I just couldn't.

(CONTINUED)

Honey/Dexter Goad/29.

I had never had a friend before, because I was always moving around from one home to the next, and your friendship with me seemed to hinge on the fact that you perceived me as a boy. It was easy to pull off. I almost never used the bathroom when we were in public together, because obviously I couldn't step up to the urinal. When it was unavoidable, I pretended it was a BM. I kept my hair and nails relatively short and tried to speak as deep as I could. When my nipples started to change and I began to develop breasts, I stopped taking my shirt off around you and started wearing even looser tee shirts. I even took to stuffing a sock in my crotch so it wouldn't look so flat."

Tom started laughing despite himself. "I'm not making fun of you. You went through all that ... for my friendship?"

Sammy nodded mutely.

"I didn't realize I came across as such a sexist. But you were right. I never would have thought of you as a friend. We would have nodded and smiled as we passed each other in the hallway, but I wouldn't have showed up at your doorway with a basketball the next day. I am a sexist pig. I'm sorry, Sammy."

She smiled lamely.

"You're afraid that this changes things? That was then. We've been through too much together, now. You are my best friend, forever. Nothing can change that now."

"I believe you."

Tom scooted over and embraced his friend, who returned it warmly. "I've got a question."

Sammy looked up. "Shoot."

(CONTINUED)

Honey/Dexter Goad/30.

"What were you going to do in another year? With steady periods and larger breasts, even a dumb ass like me would have to notice."

The girl swallowed. "I was hoping that by the time you noticed I would be beautiful enough that you would still want to be my friend."

Tom released her like she was a hot potato and jumped to his feet, where he walked a safe distance away.

"I'm sorry, I shouldn't have said that."

"No. We've always been honest with each other. I don't want that to change." Urged Tom. "I guess I have really been down on women when talking to you. The only time I talked good about them was when I was noticing their physical attributes. But you see, I thought I was talking to a boy. It's the whole bullshit macho thing, it's how guys talk to each other. I didn't mean or believe half this shit I said about women to you. I can tell by your expression that you think I'm just saying this because you're a girl."

"But I'm being honest here." Tom added. "What I said before, I said because I thought you were a boy. I believed that if I was honest about women with you, you might think I was soft, or a sissy, or a pussy whipped, or what have you. It's macho bullshit that kept me from being honest with you. Am I making any sense?"

Sammy studied her hands, a fragile smile on her face. "Yeah. You would tell me. 'Oh, I was talking to her because she has a nice ass, that's all.' When you were thinking 'She has a nice sense of humor. She is really fun to talk to.'"

(CONTINUED)

Honey/Dexter Goad/31.

But you were afraid that if you said that, I, as a fellow boy, would think you wee soft."

"Exactly."

"I knew you weren't as one dimensional as you talked." She replied proudly.

Tom stuck out a hand. "Friends 'till the end?"

"Friends 'till the end." Echoed Sammy, shaking.

"Good, let's eat."

CHAPTER FIVE

They hit the water at eight o'clock that night because the clouds brought nightfall earlier than usual. Tom gave Sammy his paddle. "Try to take better care of this one, huh?"

"Smartass."

He used his hands, an ineffective measure but better than nothing. They paddled without a break and passed the brightly lit town of Ironton around nine o'clock. This time, no one spied them, and they left it behind without incident.

"Next up, Portsmouth, twenty-five miles away. Then Ripley, fifty-eight miles beyond. I'd like to reach the outskirts of Ripley before dawn, but we're going to have to make awesome time to do that. Let's get as close as we can. Then we can walk to Ripley, get lost in the crowds, and buy what we need. And we'll pass you off as a boy in case any one is on the lookout for us."

"Sounds good. Can we get a motel room in Ripley?"

Tom nodded. "If we can find something in the twenty to thirty dollar range that has one bathroom per room. We can sleep in a bed and take a bath."

"Good. Because I can't stand myself. I need a shower."

(CONTINUED)

"That's not a very boyish attitude."

Sammy grinned. "I don't know how you boys can do it. I take two showers a day."

Tom handpaddled silently for a moment. "That reminds me. Why were you so pissed at that guy back there? What he did to you didn't justify what you did to him. Besides the considerable physical damage, you completely emasculated and humiliated him."

"Because he unmasked me, I saw our friendship going down the drain. It's the most important thing in my life, Tom! You think I'm out here going without showers because I like canoeing this much? I'm here because you need me and I would do anything for you. You have other things. Khyla, football and basketball, dozens of friends, an uncle. I don't even have any memories of my parents! I have nothing else. And I saw myself losing the one thing I do have. And if I was going to lose you, I was going to punish that son of a bitch."

Tom was embarrassed. But rather than argue how much he, in fact, "had", he changed the subject. "Well, you did that. He's still hurtin', I imagine."

An uncomfortable silence followed. Anything Tom thought to say seemed insufficient. To say he didn't deserve such a strength of feeling would be calling her a fool for giving it to him. To argue that she had more than she thought she did would be patronizing. To say he felt as strongly for her would be a paper thin and obvious lie. Although she was a very dear friend, she was not the center of his universe. Even Khyla wasn't that, although there was a time when she had been. The first love was always the strongest, despite what the poets said.

(CONTINUED)

Honey/Dexter Goad/33.

The parallel of him and Khyla versus Sammy and him struck Tom for the first time. The ages were about the same, but reversed. Everything else was the same. Especially the love the younger person felt. The final truth hit Tom like a sledgehammer. Of course Sammy loved him desperately, just as he once had with Khyla. How many nights had she lain in bed fantasizing about him? As many as he had dreamed of Khyla?

Tom knew the whole process intimately, since he had lived it. It started out as feeling flattered that an older person noticed you. It developed into friendship, delved further into hero worship. And as you went through puberty, it became full fledged devotion, love. Oh! How much it hurt. Adults derided the pain of teens, but the suffering was as much or more sharp than what grown ups felt. It hurt so bad when Khyla failed to return his love, when she rejected him because of such an insignificant reason as age difference. "Wait until you're older and I will meet you." She had said. Fuck that! She had said it to put him off, expecting him to lose interest in the intervening years. He had to some degree, but it was a painful process. Needlessly painful.

Tom sighed heavily, like an old man. He couldn't do that to Sammy. Could not.

Portsmouth came and went like a dream. The current had picked up, and they were whipping along at a good speed.

They still hadn't said anything to each other when a sudden splash startled them out of their semi-doze.

"That's the end of those cocksuckers!" Came a rough, drunken voice. "You can puke in hell!"

(CONTINUED)

Honey/Dexter Goad/34.

After a safe distance had been traveled, Sammy whispered. "What was that all about?"

Tom, who had images of a bag of puppies or kittens flying through his head, said. "Don't ask." He stretched. "Take a break, we've been at it a long time."

"What time is it? I don't have a light on my watch."

"Almost midnight."

They coasted for a mile in silence, each lost in their own thoughts. Then they came upon more voices in the night.

"-So I told Mr. Mollor to shove the test up his butt if he thought I - Hey! Look over there! Is that a boat?" A male voice was saying.

A female voice was skeptical. "You're imagining things."

"No! It's a little boat with two people in it! NO! Over there! See?"

"Oh yeah. I see. It's got two leprechauns in it. They have big hats."

Tom could hear Sammy stifling a laugh.

"Shelly, I'm serious."

They were far away enough away that her reply was incomprehensible.

This time Tom was semi-conscious when it was time to bank the boat. He snapped awake when Sammy shook him. "Is that Ripley up ahead?"

Tom squinted. Lights were visible in the predawn gloom a couple miles ahead. "Yeah, I guess so. Let's get to shore before we run out of woods to stash the boat in."

(CONTINUED)

They hit the beach and concealed the canoe in a brush thick trench a hundred yards in. "I hope we can find this again." Tom mumbled tiredly.

They walked on still numbed legs for a mile before they discovered a cheap motel outside of Ripley. Both were too tired to be choosy, so this was it.

The clerk was a young black man who was reading a computer magazine when they entered. He observed their disheveled appearance without suspicion. The bad news was, they would have to pay for two nights if they wanted to stay past eleven a.m. Tom wasn't happy, but he knew it wouldn't be any different wherever he went. At least the rooms had their own bathrooms. He paid the sixty dollars.

They entered the room, didn't bother with the lights, peeled their outer clothes off, and fell into bed together. They were both out in seconds.

Tom woke to the sound of running water. Sammy was making good use of the modern facilities. The shower seemed to go on forever. When it finally stopped, Tom got up. "If you used all the hot water, I'm going to smash you, punk!" Then he remembered that it was a girl he was addressing, not a boy. He shrugged, old habits die hard.

"Just for that, I'm getting back in!" She threatened.

Instead, the door soon opened and a much cleaner Sammy stepped out. Her hair gleamed, her eyes shined, her skin glowed. She appeared feminine as she had never had before. "You can stop crying. It's all yours."

(CONTINUED)

Tom snorted, gathered his toiletries, and disappeared into the bathroom. "Go get us a hot meal! A pizza or something. Nothing too expensive."

He was coming out when she returned with a pizza and two pops. "Good girl. I'm starving."

She beamed. "I am capable of much more complicated missions, you just don't trust me. For instance, I could have bought the paddle and canteen just now, but you're afraid I'd screw up."

Tom sat on the bed and dug into the pizza. "This room costs so fucking much, I don't think we can afford that stuff anymore. Here it is, three in the afternoon. We could never gotten enough sleep and each had a shower before eleven a.m. So we pay thirty extra bucks for four fucking hours."

Sammy seemed amused at his irritation. "Let's stay here the extra night. You said we have three free days, and we are making good time."

"Yeah, I think we will. But I wanted to save those days for when we need them. If there's a disaster of some kind, like the police pick us up, we would have a couple days leeway. Aw, screw it. We'll still have two extra days left. Might as well get our money our of this room."

The pizza was soon history. After brushing their teeth in a real sink for a change, they relaxed in the bed. "We need to take the last two days of clothes to a coin-op so we'll have something to wear tomorrow." Tom said lazily.

"Later." Sammy sighed.

"Yeah. I slept, but I'm still kind of tired."

"Me too." She kicked off her shoes.

(CONTINUED)

He reflected on his earlier musings. Then, without really thinking about it, Tom rolled to his side and leaned over Sammy. She tensed into concrete, her eyes grew big as head lamps. He lowered his head and kissed her nose, then her closed lips, as gently as if he were kissing an infant. When he drew back, she shivered violently.

" ... oh god, Tom ... " She breathed. She was still frozen, as tense as a rabbit caught in the lights of an eighteen wheeler.

Tom smiled kindly and caressed her face with one loving hand. "I know how you feel. I really do. I felt the same way for Khyla."

"And now?" She said through stiff lips.

When his hand passed her mouth, she dared to poke her tongue out enough to lick it. That turned him on, the first desire he felt for her. He withdrew his hand. "I think that I have outgrown her. I think I am making this trip to keep my promise more than anything else."

"You think?"

"I won't know until I see her. But I think it is over, before it even started."

Sammy had not relaxed a smidgen. She didn't reply, merely implored him with her eyes to go on. He kissed her again, until she loosened up enough to embrace him. He covered her face with kisses before settling next to her with his arm around her.

"I love you, Tom." She admitted, gripping his chest with one hand.

"I know." He smiled reassuringly.

Sammy bit her lip. "Are we going to do it?"

(CONTINUED)

Honey/Dexter Goad/38.

"Let's take it easy. If we rush things, it won't be as good, or mean as much."

She seemed to accept that, but considered her next question carefully. "Can you do something for me?"

"Anything, Sammy."

"Can you - I mean, I know I don't have very much-but can you touch my naked breasts? I've wanted you to for so long..."

Tom fought an urge to laugh, that would be a bad idea, besides being very cruel. He found that it was only a slight urge anyway. "Of course. No, let me pull up your shirt." He urged. He did so, slowly, liking the delicious anticipation in her eyes. Her braless breasts were normal sized for her age, but big enough that he was a goddamn fool to not have noticed them on her, however many loose tee shirts she wore. He was blind, simple as that. He caressed her stomach, her ribs, and then her sensitive young breasts.

Sammy groaned and actually climaxed. It was certainly not an orgasm as powerful as that achieved after awesome sex, but it was her first. She gasped, groaned, and relaxed for the first time since he rolled over and confronted her.

The silence between them was now comfortable and delicious as he released her.

Sammy broke it with the smallest of voices. "I wet myself."

"It's perfectly natural." He comforted.

"I've never wet myself before."

He stroked her hair, as if soothing a savage beast. "It's not urine. It's a sexual fluid."

"Oh, that."

(CONTINUED)

Honey/Dexter Goad/39.

Tom stretched out. "Let's relax, maybe catch a few Zs. Might as well get all the extra sleep we can while we have a comfortable bed."

Sammy buried her face in his chest. "Sweet dreams."

He fell asleep with his best friend warm and safe in his arms. Comforted, he didn't dream.

CHAPTER SIX

"Sammy?" Tom said groggily as he sat up. The hotel room was pitch black. A glance at the luminous numbers of his watch informed him that it was nine thirty, p.m. "Whew, I must have been one tired puppy. But I haven't really done anything, to be this exhausted." He reached over, felt Sammy under the covers, and decided to let his friend sleep, if she were still slumbering that solidly.

He went into the bathroom, blinded himself by turning on the light, and took care of business. When he came out, he thoughtlessly turned on the bedroom light. "Oh shit, sorry Sammy."

Sammy wasn't in the room. What he had felt a minute ago was a blanket covered pillow. Mind numb, panicking, Tom checked under the bed, feeling foolish when it was empty. He jumped up, heart beating wildly, about to scream or smash something when he spied the note.

It was propped against the lamp on the nightstand on his side of the bed. He could see his name scrawled over it in her cute handwriting. Tom sagged and spoke aloud without realizing it. "God. If you hadn't left a note, I was going to beat your ass."

(CONTINUED)

Honey/Dexter Goad/40.

He strolled around the bed, fighting the urge to hurry, and snatched up the note.

LOVELY TOM, (IT SAID)

Couldn't sleep long, so I'm going out. I'll find a cheap paddle if I can, if not, I'll just traipse around. Promise I'll be back by seven o'clock. Don't worry about me!

Hugs and Kisses, Samantha

Tom had to read the note three times before he realized what was bothering him. "Seven o'clock! What the hell!" He shoved the note in the direction of the bed and hauled ass to the door, which he almost tore off its hinges getting open.

The night air was cool, clean. A couple cars cruised restlessly by. Several street lamps weren't working, the pools of darkness created by their absence reminded Tom for some reason of missing teeth. Somewhere in the alley beside the motel, a dog whined in pain. The cool breath of the night was chilling his bare chest and legs. Tom slammed the door closed.

She must have been picked up by the police. That was the only explanation. She wouldn't be this late if she had a choice in the matter. He had to do something. After dressing in savage motions, he picked up the phone book and found the number of the local police station. They could trace numbers so he couldn't use his room phone. So he walked two blocks away and used a pay phone next to the bus terminal. Hopefully they would think Roger had just arrived.

"Ripley Police Station, Officer Dent speaking."

"Yes, this is Roger Clemmons, father of the missing girl, Sammy Wilder. Are you familiar with that case?"

(CONTINUED)

Honey/Dexter Goad/41.

The desperation in Tom's voice was real, and noticeable.

"I am, Mr. Clemmons. We have done all we can do, here in Ripley."

Tom hesitated. "I heard a radio report that she was picked up in your town today, is that true?"

There was a pregnant pause. "I don't think so. Surely I would have heard something. But I've been out of town today, wait a minute, allow me to check the incident reports."

"Okay, thank you."

The officer was back within five agonizing minutes. "I'm very sorry, sir, but that report must be mistaken. We haven't even had a sighting today."

"Well, thanks anyway." He hung up quickly. He ran back to his room, half hoping Sammy would be there waiting impatiently for him.

Now what? Wait here looking stupid while Sammy might be in trouble? Screw that. Go out and then miss her if she came back? Well, he'd have to leave a note for her, because he wasn't staying here a second longer.

He spent the next hour wandering around Ripley, looking earnestly at anyone who even looked vaguely like Sammy. As his frustration level grew, Tom realized that he didn't even have a picture of her. There was no way he could effectively search for her if he couldn't even show a picture of her around.

Finally, he spied someone up ahead who was dressed like his friend. Tom broke into a run, caught up to her, and pulled her around desperately. It wasn't Sammy, of course. It was a girl of about the same age, with longer and redder hair.

(CONTINUED)

Honey/Dexter Goad/42.

She squealed, thinking she was being attacked. Her companion, a heavysset woman in her early forties, wheeled. "What's your problem, buddy?"

Tom released the girl. "I'm looking for my sister. She looks a lot like you, the same size, with shorter black hair. Have you seen her?" He asked the girl.

"No, she hasn't." The mother stated protectively. "Get lost."

"Okay, sorry to bother you." He started away.

"Hey mister?" The girl chirped.

Tom turned on a dime. "Yeah?"

"What's her name?"

He sagged. "Sammy Wilder."

"I'll look out for her."

"Thanks."

Tom returned to the motel room just before eleven. The room was still empty. His note, located prominently on the bed, was undisturbed. He fretfully ate a sandwich while he watched the local news. There was no lead story about Sammy Wilder being caught by the police, in fact, there was no story about her supposedly being kidnapped by him. It was already old news, in the mind of the public, who had the attention span of a two year old on speed. There was no story about the body of a twelve year old being found, or of any anonymous twelve year old girl hospitalized for any of a million different reasons.

There was a brief story that sent his pulse racing, however.

"-and in other news, an unidentified red hair man apparently kidnapped an as yet unknown teenage boy downtown today.

(CONTINUED)

Honey/Dexter Goad/43.

The stocky, six foot tall man, who was wearing a brown suit and black tie, stopped his Ford pickup in the middle of the street, jumped out, and grabbed a black haired youth of about eleven years old and dragged the protesting boy towards the truck. When the boy resisted, the red haired man rendered him unconscious. Several passerby tried to intervene but were warned away by the man, who drew a pistol. The man then leaped into his truck and dragged the boy towards the truck. When the boy resisted, the red haired man rendered him unconscious. Several passerby tried to intervene but were warned away by the man, who drew a pistol. The man then leaped into his truck and drove away. Police Chief Jon Forecase says he has a couple leads, but that no missing children reports have been filed. If you have any infor-

Tom turned off the TV and kicked a chair across the room. "Parks! That son of a bitch! I'll kill him! I should have let-" He stopped himself, frantic.

If Parks had done something like that, in broad daylight in front of God and everybody, then the man was a lunatic. And if he was crazy, what had he done to Sammy for revenge? Sammy had humiliated and punished the man, what would a deranged mind think up to get back at her?

Tom shivered. Sammy was dead. There was no question about it. It had been at least five hours since the kidnapping, that was too long in the hands of a mad man.

"No! I don't believe it!" He seized the wooden chair and hurled it against a wall, breaking the chair and sending up clouds of plaster. "I don't believe it!" He grabbed the largest remaining piece of the chair and threw it at the ceiling.

(CONTINUED)

Honey/Dexter Goad/44.

Plaster and wooden chunks rained down. A section of one leg connected with his forehead, raising a welt and bringing more tears to his eyes. "She's not dead, goddammit!" Tom snatched up the leg section and started beating the largest remaining section of chair, the back. It splintered and cracked under his assault.

Someone pounded on the wall. "Hey! What are you doing over there? It's almost midnight! People are trying to sleep!"

Tom dropped the table leg. "You should have stayed at home if you wanted to sleep, shithead!" He screamed. What was he doing, besides wasting time? He had to pick up Sammy's trail, now, before it got too cold. Every second he wasted smashing chairs was a second Sammy was in danger.

He packed up everything, slipped on his backpack and carried Sammy's . As he bent to pick up his flashlight, which had rolled under the bed, his face pressed against Sammy's pillow. It still carried her scent. He breathed in the wonderful aroma, straightened, and grabbed her pillow on a whim.

Then Tom left the motel room, calling behind him. "You can sleep now!" He added a mutter, "heartless bastard."

Dawn. The coldest, longest, dawn of Tom's life. After the endless, nightmarish eternity that the night had been. He had traveled every street in Ripley at least five times, the alleys six. He walked a mile out of town in each direction, looking for bodies on the side of the road.

When the sun introduced itself for the day, Tom was sitting on the curb in front of the store that was pictured in the story about Sammy. It was a sporting goods store. She was here to buy that fucking paddle he was so worried about.

(CONTINUED)

Honey/Dexter Goad/45.

Then Parks happened by, saw her, and acted. During the night, Tom had remembered saying something about them buying a paddle when they reached Ripley while they were still within earshot of Parks laying on the gas station concrete. So how the man came to be here looking for them was no real mystery. He was just an idiot for saying where they were going when Parks had any chance of hearing.

Tom sighed and rose to his feet. His eyes passed over the red Ford pickup parked across the street, then returned. Was it possible? Simon Parks would have to be a total moron to return to the scene of the crime like this. There was no way of telling for sure; but it didn't seem likely, after a close examination of the truck, that it was the one Parks had used. Cigarette butts and pop cans littered the floor. A newspaper so old it was talking about something "President" Reagan said was scattered on the seats. No, Parks was a clean and neat nut. He wouldn't drive a pickup in this condition.

But it gave Tom an idea. If Parks was still in town, so was his truck. If he found a red Ford pickup truck that was spic and span, he would find Parks. He started searching.

He found it in the expansive parking lot feeding the local mall. It was one of four cars parked in the whole place, and Tom spied the truck three blocks away. As a bonus gift to early subscribers, he found Parks along with the truck. The man was crashed out on the front seat. There was no sign of Sammy.

Tom sat on the pavement next to the truck. If Sammy wasn't with Parks ... No, he wouldn't face that until he had to. She couldn't be dead. If she was ... Parks would join her.

(CONTINUED)

Honey/Dexter Goad/46.

Tom produced his Swiss Army knife and stumbled to his feet. She got away from him, somehow, and was at the motel room right now. He should have checked back there a couple times during the night, but he wasn't thinking clearly.

Now, though, he had to concern himself exclusively with Simon Parks. That man had all the answers. Tom tried the passenger door and found it unlocked. He hauled the door open squeezed the knife against Parks' neck, and spoke in a tension filled high pitched voice. "Parks! Wake up, you son of a bitch!"

The red haired man groaned and bloodshot eyes rolled open. Tom could smell the booze on his breath and everywhere else in the cab of the truck. Two empty whiskey bottles rested on the floor like discarded condoms. "Wa-oh." The eyes closed again.

Tom cursed, slapping the man repeatedly "Wake up! Wake up, or I'll kill you!"

Parks rolled onto his side and began vomiting.

The boy recoiled, then howled his frustration. Was nothing going to go right tonight? He still couldn't face the possibility that Sammy was dead, even though the fact that Parks was drunk suggested the man had drowned his guilt.

"Oh, it's you." Groaned Parks, sitting up. "Listen to me. I never intendd-I mean, I was trying to scare the girl. She panicked-it was her fault-"

Tom rushed him, brandishing his knife. "What are you saying? Tell me what happened. All of it!"

Parks leaned back against the seat. "It was blind luck that I saw her on the street. When I saw her, blind rage consumed me. Before I knew it, I had her semi conscious, in my truck..."

(CONTINUED)

Sammy moaned, bringing her hands to her face. There was already a lump swelling on her forehead, "You bully assed shitfaced motherfucker." She spat groggily.

"Me! A bully?" Parks grinned. There was nothing at all sexual about his excited glance at her. It was a deeper, more primeval lust that burned in him. The desire for revenge. "You're crazy. What I just did was nothing compared to what I am going to do to you. I'm going to match what you did blow for blow."

"No please, don't hurt me." She put her most helpless look on.

"Don't worry little girl." Parks beamed. "It won't hurt ... until it hits the bone."

When he paused at the last stop sign before the road went out of town, Sammy popped open the door and flew out of the cab.

Cursing, Simon Parks shut off the engine and jumped out after her. He chased her for several hundred yards, before she suddenly cut into the woods. Parks cut sooner and angled after her. His gun was out and his blood lust was running high. It was only a .22 but she was nothing but skin and bones. At this range he could hurt her very badly.

At this point of the river, to which she was headed, the bank was fifty feet above the water. Sammy was obviously planning to reach the precipice and slid down. If Parks tried to follow her, she would be waiting to attack him while he was in the vulnerable position of sliding down.

(CONTINUED)

Honey/Dexter Goad/48.

So he did the only thing he could. He shot her. Twice. The girl yelped as she was thrown over the edge of the bank and into the river fifty feet below.

CHAPTER SEVEN

"I ran back to my truck and left town for the day. I came back after dark to sleep off this whiskey. I was too drunk to drive very far. I had spent all evening drinking."

While Parks talked, Tom had driven to where the man said it happened, keeping the window open to air out the cabin. Now they were standing on the edge, where Parks said Sammy fell off. Tom was looking at a thin tree with a smear of blood on it about shoulder height.

Tom turned, clenching the knife in his right hand. "Goodbye Parks." He said in a flat voice.

"No, wait!" The still drunk man fumbled for the pocket that held his gun.

The knife slashed out. Parks squealed like a pig, his cut hand flew away from the offending pocket. Tom advanced.

"Wait! Look down there! I can see her!" Parks pointed at the river.

Tom stopped. "Do you see Larry Lunchmeat written on my forehead?" He hissed balefully.

"No really! I can see her down there!"

"Yeah, right. You really are pathetic. I hope that I don't die groveling and whining like a pig."

"I mean it! There she is!" Parks screamed desperately. "You don't believe me, you idiot? There she is!"

(CONTINUED)

Honey/Dexter Goad/49.

"What happens when I turn around and look?" Tom was beginning to believe the swine despite himself.

The man shrugged. "Nothing. I'm so screwed up I can barely walk. What can I do to you?"

"This has been fun, Parks. But even if you do see her, what can viewing her dead body gain me? It only makes me want to stomp your head through your ass even more."

"No! She moved! She's alive! You better get down there before she buys the farm!"

Tom rolled his eyes. "Oh, how convenient! Is she holding up a sign saying 'Tom, please turn your back to Parks and look at me?' Enough is enough, Parks."

"I'll tell you what." He answered quickly. "I'll circle you until you can look down there and keep me in your sight. How is that?"

The boy swallowed. That seemed reasonable. That didn't mean he wouldn't watch Parks like a hawk the whole way, however. "Okay. But slow and easy."

They carried it without mishap. Parks, looking relieved, circled Tom while the boy turned with him. "Now sit down, on your hands."

Parks complied without question or delay. Tom frowned. What the hell was the man playing? What did he hope to achieve with this charade? Still worried, he looked over the edge. "You lying moth-Holy shit!"

"See?" Parks said happily. "I told you she was down there."

Tom had already plunged over the side and was sliding down to where Sammy was stiffly crawling up.

(CONTINUED)

Honey/Dexter Goad/50.

She moved with the woodenness of a zombie and the deliberateness of a snail. At her pace, she wouldn't cover the last twenty feet to the top for a couple hours. She would reach up, grab a tree trunk or imbedded rock, pull herself up a few inches, rest, then drag her feet up a little to improve her leverage. She would continue that until she was even with the handhold and then repeat the process.

He reached her height and scooted over to her. Hesitant to squeeze her because he didn't know where she was injured, Tom embraced his friend. "Oh, thank God you're alive!" He cooed passionately.

Sammy looked up blankly, here eyes dead with shock. Her face was filthy with mud and blood, her left brow was gouged out by what had to have been a heartstopping near miss. The wound was no longer bleeding. She returned her face to the ground and tried to keep climbing.

Tom picked her up like a cat and put her over one shoulder, after making sure she wasn't gut shot. She clawed at him weakly as he briskly made it to the top and rejoined Parks. He put Sammy on her back gently and examined her more closely.

The other bullet had penetrated the soft flesh under her left armpit. There seemed to be something wrong with both feet or ankles, probably from the fall. But both gunshot wounds were little more than flesh wounds. Tom sat next to her, bringing the canteen to her lips. She drank greedily, regaining her senses a little. "... Tom ..." She gasped.

Parks cackled. "Hell, she sounds better than I do." He had puked again, in his lap.

(CONTINUED)

Honey/Dexter Goad/51.

His once neat overalls were trashed by now. His hair was a disaster.

"... Tom ... hit him ... for me ... I'm too weak ..."

He smiled fondly and caressed her hair. "Shhh. Save you strength. You're safe now."

She tried to sit up. "Tom, if you love me, hit that motherfucker!" She gasped fervently.

Tom glanced up at Parks, who looked uncomfortable suddenly. "Look, let's let bygones be bygones." The proposed victim suggested. "You hurt me, I hurt you, nobody's dead. Let's leave it at that."

"Sure." Tom replied. "We're even. After you give me all your money, and you drive us to a motel."

Parks scowled. "Now wait a min-awww!" He yelped as Sammy clawed his outstretched leg with the last of her energy. She lay back, her short fingernails bloody.

"Jesus on a cross! Keep that bitch away from me!" He scampered back.

Tom chuckled. "If you don't give us your money and the ride, I'll lock you in the cab of the truck with her!" He threatened.

Sammy was too drained to sit up and grin viciously like she wanted to, but the coward in Parks won him over anyway. "All right! All right, here you go. About two hundred bucks."

"You brought this on yourself." Reminded Tom.

CHAPTER EIGHT

"What now?" A washed and bandaged Sammy asked as she ate take out soup and sandwiches on the motel bed.

(CONTINUED)

Honey/Dexter Goad/52.

They had discovered that while both ankles were too painful to walk on, the other wounds were not serious.

"Later, after you have rested, we're going to a Laundromat. We have no clothes left."

"Just go by yourself. I'm too tired."

Tom kissed her forehead and hair. "I'm not letting you out of my sight the rest of this trip. Uh-uh."

"Oh, for crying out loud. It was a once in a million thing."

He shook his head severely. "No way. We don't part. That's the end of the matter. I am not going through the hell I suffered last night again. We may even shower together."

Her look was mischievous. "It was that bad when I didn't come back?"

But Tom was in no mood to joke about this. "Oh man, the worst feeling in the world. I was going out of my mind." He told her about the chair in the motel room. "I've never done anything like that before."

Sammy was laughing. "I don't believe it!"

He lightened up a little. "We can joke now, and it is a little funny, but I was going to kill that nutcase. I still can't believe he snatched you right off the street like that! He's insane!"

She mused as she finished her meal. "I think he'll be back when he sobers up. We humiliated him again. A battered twelve year old girl and a fifteen year old boy robbed a man who's six foot two hundred pounds. And he had a gun! He'll be back."

"He's a coward. I think we've seen the last of him. But just in case, you go nowhere without me."

(CONTINUED)

Honey/Dexter Goad/53.

Sammy yawned hugely, "What about your deadline? Are we staying here another night?"

Tom gave a displeased shrug. "Can't help it. You need rest and a clean environment. We'll see how you feel tomorrow. Let see, we left the 2nd. Spent the day in the bushes. Came here the 3rd. Spent the day in a motel. That was yesterday, the 4th. Today is the 5th. We will spend all day today and the daylight hours of tomorrow here. Hopefully, we will push off tomorrow night. That will be the evening of the 6th. That leaves the nights of the 6th, 7th, 8th, 9th, 10th, and the 11th to travel. That is six nights to travel, and we need only five. So you getting 36 hours of rest doesn't hurt us. Relax and enjoy it, buddy. I left when I did to account for emergencies."

She buried her face in the pillow. "I'm so tired."

"Goodnight." He stroked her back and legs. "Sleep tight, buddy."

Tom watched her as the girl slept. He sat at the motel room's table and looked as her chest rose and fell, as her slender limbs moved under the covers, as her breath stirred the hair resting against her cheek, and as her face relaxed finally when she was deep in sleep. As the tension left her body, it left his.

He joined her, easing beside her slowly enough that she didn't wake. His lips brushed hers, then he whispered ever so softly into her ear. "Never again, love." He promised. "We'll never be separated again."

And Tom slept for the first time since her disappearance.

(CONTINUED)

Honey/Dexter Goad/54.

Tom dreamed that Sammy was lost again, this time in a vast forest. As he searched and called out to her, a panther stalked him. The big cat finally caught him as he was closing in on his friend's prone form. The panther drove him down and began to eat his right ear.

Tom woke to discover Sammy nibbling on his ear. "What the fuck are you doing?" He exclaimed.

She giggled. "What's the matter? Did you dream about piranhas or something?"

"Close enough." He grabbed her, mindful of her injuries, and pulled her to him. They kissed deeply, their first real kiss. "I love you." He gasped as they broke.

Sammy looked ready to explode with happiness. "I love you." She stated with a crooked grin.

Tom thought there was nothing in the world more beautiful than a woman's smile. Even an "ugly" woman had a beautiful smile. There was just something about the unadulterated joy in the female smile that couldn't be beat. If his eyes hadn't brushed across the bandage under her arm at that moment, he would have made love to her right then and there.

Later, he would regret not doing it while he had the chance.

Instead, he kissed her again and got up. "I'm going to wash the sleep out of my eyes and then we have a mission."

Sammy rose to her knees on the bed, face flushed in the manner of a girl that has been thoroughly kissed. She nodded wisely. "Laundry."

"Yes, one of the more mundane details of life."

(CONTINUED)

Honey/Dexter Goad/55.

He carried her piggy back, since her ankles were still too sore, while carrying the backpack of dirty laundry in his hands. When she was deposited on a waiting bench in the Laundromat, he let out a breath of relief. "I'll tell you what, Sambo, for a little squirt you are heavy!" Tom started loading a washer.

"I weigh more than you think I do, smartass."

He guffawed. "You don't even weigh a bill!"

Sammy straightened her back. "Excuse me? I weigh a hundred and five pounds, thank you very much!"

"Bullshit." He turned from the machine and strolled the windows. It was midafternoon. "If you weigh ninety-five I'll kiss your ass."

"Boy, I wish there was a scale in here!" She shot back hotly, glaring around the room.

Tom stretched lazily. "I'm starving. Let's go to that mom and pop restaurant across the street."

A sullen silence was his only answer.

He turned, postured to apologize or say what he could to appease her but froze when he saw her expression. He returned his gaze to the street, to see what she was looking at. Roger Clemons was sauntering down the sidewalk, if a man his size could saunter. Of course he entered the dining establishment Tom had been just looking at. Rarely did Roger walk *past* a restaurant.

"How the fuck did he get here?" Sammy expressed.

"You don't have to scream, I'm right next to you." Soothed Tom.

Fretfully, Sammy tried to jump to her feet. Perhaps she intended to storm across the street and kick some fat butt.

(CONTINUED)

Honey/Dexter Goad/56.

All she succeeded in doing was aggravating her injuries. She cried out as she fell to the floor. There, she fought back tears of pain. "Goddamn." She gasped after a minute. "That hurt."

Tom was inspecting her. "Your ankles are already swelled up the size of softballs. I don't think you should be jumping up on them like that." He deadpanned.

"No shit, sherlock." She finally sat up.

"You have a new bruise on your elbow." He noticed.

Sammy glared at him. "You think this is hilarious, don't you, shithead?"

"You know, you really do have a foul mouth. Maybe you should tone it down a little."

"Fuck you."

Tom continued on bravely. "Think of colorful alternatives. Like 'screw you' instead of 'fuck you.' That's a little more tame but gets the point across."

"Fuck you."

"Or butthole instead of asshole."

"Stick it in your fucking asshole."

"I'm not saying this because now you are a girl." He cautioned. "I've been meaning to bring it up for a long time now."

"I've always been a goddamn girl, you stupid assed motherfucker."

Tom couldn't hold back anymore. He started laughing. She joined him, and neither could stop until they were hurting. "I've got a stitch." She complained, holding her side. "It's your fucking fault." That got them going again.

(CONTINUED)

Honey/Dexter Goad/57.

They were still laughing when the door opened.

A housewife in her midthirties glanced at them, two apparent boys rolling together on the floor of a Laundromat laughing, and shook her head.

It was enough to sober them. They returned to their seats, Sammy painfully. "Don't mind me." The woman advised in a nasal voice that was nonetheless pleasant. "I've got two boys your ages, nothing you do could faze me."

They smiled innocently at her. Sammy leaned over and whispered. "I forgot about Roger! Is he still in there?"

Tom waved that off. "I don't care. He's not going to stop us."

"How did he get here?"

"He also knows that we are going down the river. Fuck, we might as well have placed a full page ad in the New York Times. Everybody knows where we are."

She agreed. "Did you see that silly bandage on his nose?"

"It only looked silly because his face was around it."

Chapter Eight Her foster father was nowhere in sight when they departed the Laundromat. They never saw him leave the mom and pop eatery, but neither was he in the building as they walked by. It made them a little uneasy, as if he was subject to pop up anywhere or disappear at any time.

"How could anybody that size sneak out?" Sammy snorted derisively.

"He probably left while we were on the floor. Perhaps he just went in to see if we were there. Maybe he is scanning every restaurant and grocery store in town, knowing we have eat."

(CONTINUED)

Honey/Dexter Goad/58.

"What does he hope to achieve?" Sammy wanted to know "If he does find us, I'll beat his fat ass."

Tom smiled tenderly, glad she couldn't see his expression. As long as he had known her, Sammy had acted like she had a pistol in her pocket. He'd had to pull her out of many scrapes to keep her from getting killed. She refused to back down from anybody. No matter the size, age, or sex. Sammy didn't know what intimidation meant. "I think you better wait until you can walk before you take on somebody four times your size." He suggested dryly.

"Are you making fun of me?" She threatened as they reached the motel door.

"Not I." He replied in a quivering voice.

"You have been a barrel of laughs today, haven't you? Except when I wanted to joke about you missing me!"

He placed her on the bed. "Touché. Peace?" He offered a hand.

She kissed the hand. "I guess it's three day old peanut butter sandwiches and ice water, huh?"

"Looks like it." He matched her smile.

They were still on the sleep from dawn to noon schedule, so they stayed up all night. To pass the time, they watched network late night movies, joking with each other about the weak plots, bad acting, or fake fight scenes. The funniest movie (which wasn't trying to be a comedy, they didn't think) was an old "horror" movie. They laughed all the way through it.

At dawn, on the 6th of August, they fell asleep in each other's arms.

(CONTINUED)

Honey/Dexter Goad/59.

As two days before, Tom awoke to the sound of a shower. That was good news, he reflected, as he readied himself to take one after her. At least Sammy could walk now, even if she did get up early so she could suck up all the hot water. But after the other day, he didn't mind as long as she was with him.

The illusion she could walk was shattered when she crawled out of the bathroom. "Morning."

"Why didn't you just wait for me to wake up? And why didn't you take a bath? A shower must have been awkward as hell." He queried.

"Why should I wait for you to wake up?" She snapped. "I got it done." She climbed up to the bed like a cat and lay supine.

"So why didn't you take a bath?"

Sammy scowled. "The stupid fucks who designed this building thought it a great idea to have all the showers and no baths. But I managed."

"Let me see those ankles." He grimaced as she displayed the swollen, heavily bruised extremities. "Shit. You're not walking on those for a while."

"Tell me about it."

"I guess we'll have to stay tonight as well."

Sammy was alarmed. "That's your last extra day! Can you risk it? All I'm going to be doing is sitting in a damn boat! It's not like I need to walk anywhere."

"True enough." Tom agreed. "But we will use up the last extra day anyway. I'm most concerned with you getting an infection. You were drained more than you care to admit. It takes time to recoup your energy. Tomorrow night will be soon enough."

(CONTINUED)

Honey/Dexter Goad/60.

Her scowl remained. "You act like you don't care if we make it in time or not."

He bent far enough to lick her knee. "Maybe I don't."

Sammy shivered. "Uh, Tom. What about your promise to her? How would you have felt if she broke it and you still loved her? You can't do that to her, if she still feels for you and wants to see you one more time. You can't, Tom."

Tom had a mischievous glint in his eye. "What's this? Empathy? From you? I'm shocked."

For a change, she was in a mood to play when he was. "Hey, I'm not a hardass twenty four-seven."

He patted the still wet knee he had licked. "We'll make it. Don't worry."

Her mood changed subtly. She grabbed his wrist as he tried to pull away. "Finish what you started."

Tom regarded her with love for a long moment. "Why do I get the feeling that if I did, we would be in this room for the next week until we ran out of food?"

Sammy bit her lip, leaned forward, eyed him suspiciously, then spoke. "I guess you're right." Her words were measured.

That day and night was spent much as the last. The day portion of the 7th was used up finally buying the paddle and extra canteen, as well as loading up on canned goods and sandwich makings. They also had one last hot meal at a local diner. During their trips through Ripley that day, neither of them spied Roger or Parks.

(CONTINUED)

Sammy could stand on her ankles, the swelling of which had receded, and hobble a bit, but Tom still had to carry her. They had no further time to waste. They had to go tonight or concede making the deadline. Despite his kidding yesterday, Tom had no intention of doing that. If for no other reason, missing the target date made everything they had persevered meaningless.

"Ready to go?" She asked brightly.

Sammy got to her feet like a fledgling deer. "I am beyond ready. This has been nice, but it's time to blow this joint."

"Jump up." He offered his back. She would wear her backpack and carry the paddle. He would have her on his back and carry his backpack. They made a strange sight, he was sure. "Let's roll, damn it."

"Where the fuck is it?" Tom cursed, pushing branches aside and peering into the depression below him.

Sammy was perched on a nearby log, as she had been during the twenty minute search. "Think somebody found it? It was valuable enough that most people wouldn't think twice about stealing it."

"Don't say that. Don't even think it." He jumped down in to the depression and started following it. "If that happens, it is walking and hitchhiking for us, buddy. And you can't walk."

"I can walk, it just hurts so damn much that I don't want to."

The following void in conversation was filled with sounds of thrashing, branches breaking, and heavy breathing. "I found it! It's a hundred yards further down than I thought it was! I thought I had the landmarks right, but obviously not."

(CONTINUED)

Honey/Dexter Goad/62.

She could hear him dragging it out.

"Good job, Tonto."

"It's been three days. What do you expect. We were lucky to remember which way to leave town." He returned, looking flushed and happy. "Boy, I'm ready to go. All this sitting around when we have a deadline has set my teeth on edge." He carried her to the bank of the river, then brought over the canoe.

Soon, after one last check to insure nothing had been forgotten, they were off.

It started raining as they passed Ripley. Lightly at first, but soon thick sheets were drenching them and filling the boat, while turning the river into a tempest.

"Fuck!" Squealed Tom like a drowning cat. "We don't have anything to bail with, do we? We're going to get swamped."

Sammy's mind raced furiously. "We can't pull over, we don't have time! Wait a minute! You use my canteen and I'll use the plastic bowl we had the fruit in!"

"I need to steer!" Tom countered. "I can't bail. And careful about rocking the boat!"

"Okay!" Sammy bailed with both. The canteen filled and emptied slowly, but was better than nothing. The bowl was better, she was throwing out ten bowlfuls a minute. Soon she had the water level in the boat down to reasonable terms and was able to rest.

The rain was coming down in torrents, and showed no sign of slowing down. After three rounds of bailing the boat, they switched jobs; Tom bailing, Sammy steering. Three more rounds they switched back.

(CONTINUED)

Honey/Dexter Goad/63.

The only good thing coming out of it was the current picking up. They made Newport, fifty miles from Ripley, in less than five hours. The rain died off after a couple hours, strengthened as they neared Newport, then lessened again as they passed the city. But it never rally stopped. All night there was at least a light drizzle.

They didn't see much of Newport, few lights were on at two in the morning while they were busy bailing. During the light drizzles, they said little and moved less, both of them were tired and jumpy. Tom spoke for the first time in hours after they had left Newport behind. "Well, twelve miles to Cincinnati. We will be able to see the Jungle, where your sorry assed BENGALS will lose six or seven games this year."

"Hey! My BENGALS are awesome! Especially at home!"

"Yeah, awesomely bad."

Sammy snorted, wiping water from her eyes with one drenched hand. "What are you, a Cleveland fan?" She made that sound like something beneath hog pen cleaners.

"No. I am not a hardcore fan of any football team."

"Then get off my cloud."

Tom scowled wearily at the sky. "Speaking of clouds, I wish this goddamn rain would stop. It couldn't rain while we were in the hotel, could it?"

"It was waiting for us. If we had stayed another night in the motel, it wouldn't have rained until tomorrow night." Stated Sammy.

Tom grinned. "Boy. And they say 'Generation X' is cynical."

(CONTINUED)

Honey/Dexter Goad/64.

The current was still fast, and they reached the outskirts of Cincy within an hour. The rain picked up again, as violent as anytime that night, accompanied by hailstones. They were little ones, none larger than pebbles, but uncomfortable. As such, neither of them saw much more of the river city than they did of Newport. Sammy did get a chance to see Riverfront Stadium, the first time she had actually seen it in person. That kept her grinning for the next hour. She imagined playing in that stadium, hitting guys. She would play defense because she liked hitting people more than she did getting hit. She imagined delivering a slobber knocker to a receiver and then having him look up at her. A girl! He would say. A girl hit me that hard? Good hit rookie! Sammy giggled.

"What are you snickering about?" Tom inquired. They were an hour out of Cincy, and maybe an hour to Ohio/Indiana border. The rain was a fine mist now, the easiest it had been since it started.

"I was just thinking. When I get old enough, I'm going to try out for the BENGALS. I can help them. Parks can testify, I hit harder than a motherfucker."

Tom smiled fondly. "You could make the team, but you won't. Some guy will have you filled up with babies by then."

She was quick. "Some guy. Not you?"

Oops. An innocent remark, and it could lead to WWIII. "If the BENGALS quarterback came up right now, you'd leave me without a second thought. Wouldn't you?"

"Only until I got his autograph." But there was little teasing in her voice. She sounded distracted.

(CONTINUED)

Honey/Dexter Goad/65.

There was a long silence, during which the rain intensified a little. When Sammy spoke, her voice was impassive. "You're just humoring me, aren't you, Tom? You're stringing me along until I 'get over' you. Is that it? Khyla hurt you in this same situation, and you don't want to do that to me. So you won't be honest and say it won't work."

"Oh come on--"

"That's it, isn't it? That's why you won't make love to me. You do just enough to fool me. Touch my breasts. Lick my knee. Kiss me. But in actuality, I don't even turn you on enough to get you hard. Do I? You're just playing me, aren't you Tom?"

Tom wished desperately that he had made love to her the other night so he wouldn't be in a position to have to lie to her now.

"Sammy, that's not true. You're getting carried away--"

"You've already insulted my intelligence. Are you going to compound that?"

Jesus Christ, she was really pissed this time. And hurt. Very hurt. "Sammy ... " His voice trailed off.

"You son of a bitch."

Tom swallowed his guilt at hearing the pain in her voice. Why didn't she cry and release some of that pain? But no, she was like a boy in that she held it in until she could physically retaliate.

"You lying, patronizing, coward motherfucker."

"Sammy, please--"

She cut him off. "Take us to the bank."

Tom glanced at his watch. It was four thirty. They had made good time tonight. They could stop now.

(CONTINUED)

Honey/Dexter Goad/66.

"I said, 'Take us to the bank.'"

He followed orders. There were no trees in this part of bank, it looked like farmland. But the canoe and sleeping bag could be concealed in the rows of corn which began a couple hundred feet from the river.

Sammy jumped out, squealed in pain, and fell to her knees. She began coughing. Tom dragged the boat out and knelt beside her as the rain picked up. "Get the fuck away from me." She hissed threateningly.

"Come on, I have to get you out of the rain. You're weak. You'll be sick as a dog."

"You touch me and you'll regret it." So warning, she started to crawl up the bank.

He tried to pick her up and received a blow to his jaw that knocked him to his knees, more by surprise than by force. Tom rose to his knees and attempted to shake the stars from his eyes. Sammy had vanished into the night. "Sammy! Don't leave me! Please!"

"Fuck you!" That weak wail was followed by another, wet cough.

CHAPTER NINE

Tom woke around noon, after an exhausting two hour search in the damn gloom and a fretful sleep. Figuring that she couldn't crawl far and that it would be easier to find her in daylight after some sleep. Tom had convinced himself to lay down.

The only problem was, noon was only a little brighter than dawn. The sky was cloud filled, the rain was relentless.

(CONTINUED)

Honey/Dexter Goad/67.

Tom, long past the prune stage, was beginning to feel like he was never going to be dry again.

But finding Sammy proved easy. Her extended bouts of painful sounding wet coughs led him right to her. She was curled up into a pitiful ball, her backpack under her head. She had all of her clothes out and over her, using them as a makeshift blanket. Despite that, she was shivering like a leaf on a breezy day.

Tom embraced her soggy form. "I'm getting you inside. I don't care where."

"Get the fuck away from me, you bastard." Her voice was almost gone.

He ignored that, packing away all of her extra clothes. Sammy tried to hit him. It was like being punched by a kitten. So she switched to scratching, which was more successful. "Ow. OW! Stop that stupid shit." He wiped his bleeding hand on her shirt and got his arms under her.

"You pick me up, I'll scratch your eyes out." She breathed with real menace.

Tom met her glowering gaze. "You're going to have to do it. I'm not leaving you here." He picked her up.

Sammy glared hatefully into his face, then suffered a coughing fit that left her weak as a wet paper bag. She sagged in his arms.

He grabbed her backpack and started walking.

"Daddy?"

"Shh, honey. It's Tom. I'm not your daddy. Does that hot bath feel good?"

(CONTINUED)

Honey/Dexter Goad/68.

"Hmmm. I love you, daddy."

...

"I hate you Roger. Leave me alone."

"It's Tom. Drink this ... easy!"

"I hate Tom too. Leave me alone."

"Come on, eat the soup while it's hot."

...

"My throat hurts."

"Here you go. Swallow. There."

...

"Sleep, angel. Your fever has finally broken."

Sammy opened her eyes. She was weak, her throat hurt, and when she sat up, the room began spinning. But she felt better. She was in a soft bed. She was clean, freshly washed. She wasn't hungry or thirsty. And her fever was gone, as was her cough.

She had been awake for twenty minutes when Tom opened the outside door and bounded in with a paper sack. His eyes glowed when he saw her. "You're awake! How do you feel, Sambo?"

"I feel like kicking your ass!" Her head was already too heavy. She lay back. "I'll do it later."

He produced a bottle of orange juice from the bag and poured her a cup. "Drink up."

She accepted it. "I guess I was sick as fuck. How long was I out?"

Tom mentally tabulated for a minute. "About thirty-six hours, counting from when we landed. I found you about noon yesterday."

"What!? What is today's date?"

(CONTINUED)

Honey/Dexter Goad/69.

"The 9th of August." He said sadly. "It's one in the afternoon."

"We didn't travel last night? But Tom! You're not going to make it in time now! Why didn't you leave me here and go on?" She implored. "You could have left a note explaining why, I would have understood. Especially after how I treated you."

He shook his head. "You must still have a fever if you think I could have left you. Consider this my penance for being a fake son of a bitch."

Sammy put aside her empty glass. "You gave up meeting Khyla just to stay with me?"

"What did you expect me to do? A friend is much more important than a memory."

Sammy toyed with her glass. "You're a good friend. You always have been. But that was a shitty thing you did."

"I won't deny I started out thinking exactly what you said." Tom admitted as he sat on the foot of the bed. "I should have thought about how perceptive you are. But, I just couldn't bear having you go through what Khyla put me through. Part of me hates her for not giving me a chance, whatever the rationalizations about age or whatnot."

Her face was impassive. He disliked it when her face lost it's usual expressiveness. Talking to her when she was upset was already like feeling his way through a minefield. The wrong words could set her off, as happened the other night. So when he couldn't play off what her face told him, it was twice as hard. "What do you mean you started out thinking what I said."

(CONTINUED)

Honey/Dexter Goad/70.

"I've come to terms with the idea. I'm real now. No more fake shit. I swear." It was best to keep it as simple and honest as you could with Sammy. She saw through extended rationalizations. He was finished lying to her, but he had to convince her of that, which wouldn't be easy.

But she surprised him. "I believe you, Tom. I love you." Her eyes challenged him. He read the message. Loud and clear. You don't have to say you love me back. But if you do say it, you'd better mean it because I can tell. He never knew 100 percent what she would do, but he suspected that she would walk if he lied to her again, and this time would keep walking, or crawling, considering her present condition.

He took her hands carefully and gazed into her eyes. "Tell me again after I see Khyla. I'll know, one way or another, by then. Sometimes I hate her, sometimes I ... I don't."

Sammy accepted that. "Then you still think we'll make it?"

"Oh, we'll make it. If I have to stop time, I'm going to be there."

His plan wasn't that drastic. They had three nights to travel approximately 295 miles, which worked out to a hundred miles a night. Going ten miles an hour, which was only achieved when the current was strong, that was ten hours a night. They could squeeze ten hours out if they started at eight p.m., instead of nine, and finished at six a.m. That was pushing it. With the police on the lookout for them, if not actively searching for them, it wouldn't do for too many people to see them on the river.

(CONTINUED)

Honey/Dexter Goad/71.

If one smart policeman got a report or two that two teenagers were canoeing west on the Ohio and matched that with the kidnapping report from Pomeroy, they would be easy to catch.

Sammy was optimistic. "We can still make it! I didn't realize the numbers broke down like that."

"Well, the last night we traveled was going to be short work anyway. I planned to reach Evansville around midnight on the seventh day of travel. But averaging ten miles an hour is a lot to ask."

She shrugged. "If we don't make it by dawn on the 12th, fuck it. We keep going. What would we have to lose at that point? If somebody sees us they see us. You have until dusk. We'll make it!"

Sammy ate and rested until it was time to leave at six o'clock. She had discovered that she could walk if she took it real easy and went a top speed of a quarter of a mile an hour. Tom would still have to carry her any real distance, but at least she could use the bathroom without crawling or being transported like a sack of dirty laundry.

They both took showers before they left because it would be their last opportunity. They were flat broke. Motel rooms, food, medicine, etc. had consumed it all. They would be living on the rough from here on out. Sandwiches and canned food would be their only fare.

"Where the hell are we, anyway?" Sammy inquired as she climbed on his back.

(CONTINUED)

Honey/Dexter Goad/72.

"Lawrenceburg, Indiana. Just across the state border. I carried you about five miles until I reached it, so we got a long walk back."

At some point during her sickness, the rain stopped. But the ground was still sodden, and the sky was cloudy and sullen. "God, I hope it doesn't rain again." Sammy moaned. "That was the worst night of my life, all things considered."

"Tell me about it."

This time Tom easily found the canoe, and they were underway while it was still light. Neither of them felt comfortable until they were under the protective cloak of night, however. Two groups of people spotted them while it was still light. There may have been more, but the two were all Tom and Sammy saw. The first group was five teenagers sitting on a hill over looking the river. The two girls and three boys, one of each sex of whom were black, waved and called out greetings.

"Where are you headed?" One boy called out. He was the tallest, and wore a long flannel shirt. His Reds baseball cap was turned around backwards.

"We're going to the 'big water'!" Tom called back. "'Big water!'"

They laughed. He didn't know whether they got it, but it amused them. A moment the black girl proved that she, at least, had gotten it. "Are you a sea gull?" She called out.

"Yes! Exactly!" He laughed merrily.

They saw her explain something to the others, who were equally amused. One of the boys pitched something to them as they passed. "Seagull food!"

(CONTINUED)

Honey/Dexter Goad/73.

Sammy caught it, surprised at the accuracy. It was a big juicy apple. "Thanks!" She called back.

They waved good-bye to each other.

"What the fuck was that 'big water' shit?"

Tom laughed. "Before your time, kiddo. I doubt if you ever saw the movie or read the book."

Sammy shrugged. "At least we got an apple out of it. Want half?"

The second group of people were in Lawrenceburg proper. Two policemen were standing on a pier with two other men who were dressed as fishermen. One of them spied the canoe and pointed. "Hey fellows!" One of the policemen said in a friendly tone.

Nothing more was said until the canoe was going by the pier. "Where are you men headed?" The officer who had spoken before asked politely.

"No 'big water!'" Sammy hissed.

Tom ignored her. "We're just trying out our pa's new boat."

"I don't remember seeing you boys around here before."

"Pull up to the dock, let's talk for a second." The second officer added.

They were past the dock. "Sorry!" Tom called out, still playing the dumb role. "We can't turn back."

"Bullshit." One policeman scoffed. "The current ain't that strong. Come back!"

"What are your names?" The other man of the law inquired.

Tom turned back and started paddling faster. Sammy followed suit.

"Come back or I'll shoot."

(CONTINUED)

Honey/Dexter Goad/74.

Sammy shot a worried glance behind them. "Shit! He's got his gun out, Tom!"

"He won't shoot." Tom assured her as he paddled harder.

"That's easy for you to say. I've been shot this week. It's no fun."

They both jumped at the gunshot. Tom jerked around, sure that Sammy had had it and almost capsizing the boat with his sudden motion, but the girl was unharmed, if very angry.

"He shot way off to the side. That goddamn son of a bitch! Why isn't he off catching real criminals or something? Isn't there a fucking bank robber or murderer in Lawrenceburg?"

"He's trying to scare us, honey. Make us come back. And for all he knows, we are 'real' criminals. We didn't respond when he ordered us to stop. That is fleeing, and fleeing implies guilt. And the guilt could be of anything from murder to jaywalking. He doesn't know."

They were a safe distance away now. The men had left the dock, perhaps to drive ahead and cut them off. Tom hoped frantically that a county line was nearby. "He fired at kids, Tom! And if you call me 'honey' again, you'll regret it."

"What are you so pissed about?" She had been more temperamental the last week than he had ever seen her. Probably because she was having difficulty coming to terms with acting like a girl. After all, she had played the boy role, and done a good job, for over a year now.

"An unintentional double entendre." She muttered, and he understood.

(CONTINUED)

Tom blushed, glad she couldn't see that he was embarrassed for her. "No need to be ashamed. It happens to everybody. And it isn't surprising considering you were shot twice four days ago."

"Oh, shut up. I can deal with it. It just sucks."

No pursuit appeared in front of them, and Tom began to relax as night fell completely. When he was positive they were in the next county, he felt safe to converse.

"You called to a lot of people while you were fevered, Sammy. One of them was your father. Do you remember your father? I thought you said you were orphaned when you were three."

"I was."

The silence dragged on. Tom finally convinced himself to take the plunge. "Do you remember him?"

"No."

"Then who were you calling to?" Inquired the boy bravely.

Sammy made a rude noise. "How should I know? I was fevered, right? Since we're getting personal, will you tell me something?"

"You haven't told me anything personal yet."

"I told you I was really a girl, didn't I? What can be more personal than whether you stand up or sit down to use the bathroom? Your turn, buddy."

She had him there. "Okay. Ask."

"Are you a virgin?"

Tom contemplated the dark water momentarily. "I have a real problem with boys who haven't had sex with a girl being called a virgin. You see, when a woman has sex for the first time, there is a physical change - her hymen is broken. Before, she has one.

(CONTINUED)

Honey/Dexter Goad/76.

After, she doesn't. So there is a measurable change. There is no comparable change in a boy. It isn't even his first discharge, in most cases, because of wet dreams."

"Jesus fucking Christ. Is that fifty word sidestep your way of saying you are a virgin?"

"No, it's just a pet peeve. And no, I am not a 'virgin'." He considered, "Well, I'd guess you'd call me a half virgin."

Sammy jumped on that. "Do tell. You'd never tell me your war stories when I was your male friend."

"Mostly because I didn't have any. But also, I'm not big on spreading tales about girls. That doesn't wind my clock." He cleared his throat. "Anyway, you remember eight months ago when I went camping and ice fishing with a couple guys in my class?"

"The week before Christmas? Yeah. I'd never heard of camping in winter time."

"Mom was feeling better and talked me into going. She said she wanted some time to herself. Well, Tony's sister Holly went with us. We hit it off good, and one thing led to another. She led me to the extra cabin, disrobed, and stripped me. But she didn't have any rubbers, of course neither did I, and she would not consider the chance of getting pregnant. So we did it the sixty-nine way. That has been my only experience."

Sammy swallowed. "Oh, gross."

"What! Are you crazy?" There was a smirk in his voice. "Well, when you grow up you'll-"

She rocked the boat with a savage lean. "Don't patronize me, you son of a bitch."

(CONTINUED)

Honey/Dexter Goad/77.

Tom laughed. "Okay, okay! Your turn. Tell me something personal."

Sammy bit her lip. "Okay. There was this anthill outside my foster house three years ago. It was pretty big, maybe an inch high. I first noticed it on my way to school in late Spring. Every day, when I passed it to and from school, I would spend a few minutes watching the busy little ants. I like ants, they don't fuck around, you know? They take care of business and then run to the next job. When the school was out, I'd spend hours watching the ants and the anthill. Did you know that ants can strip down a little Debbie oatmeal pie in two hours? Down to the wrapper, buddy. Anyway, I was standing in my yard talking to the girl who lived next door when she noticed the ant hill.

"She grinned at me, asked. 'You know how to piss off a bunch of ants?', and stomped the ant hill. Needless to say, I put that bitch in the hospital. Broken nose, three busted teeth, various bruises. I had to go to the hospital myself, for two broken knuckles. Also needless to say, I was sent away from that foster home. So I never got to see if those ants rebuilt their home or not. But I'll bet that silly cunt thought twice before she stepped on another anthill."

"Sammy."

"What?"

I love you, he wanted to say. And he meant it. He knew that now. This wonderfully complex, coarse at times, passionate at times, but always adorable girl had captured his heart. He wanted to grow up with her. Learn every facet of her makeup, enjoy every mood swing.

(CONTINUED)

Honey/Dexter Goad/78.

Convert her violent urges into carnal ones. Surround her pained center with layers of love.

But he couldn't say any of that yet. It would have to wait until he had satisfied her that Khyla had no hold over him. Or perhaps satisfied himself on that point. "You are wonderful." He said at last.

"My foster parents of the time were horrified." Cautioned Sammy.

CHAPTER TEN

It was one thirty a.m. when they passed Vevay. That occurred without incident, except for the fact that they spotted what looked like a house fire within the city.

"Look at it burn!" Sammy exclaimed in awe.

"Hope everybody got out." Added Tom, perhaps to remind his friend that lives could be in danger.

If so, it didn't dampen her enthusiasm. "How could anything burn, as wet as it has been?"

Tom shook his head, Still, it was a better reception than they had gotten in Lawrenceburg.

Half past three a.m. They passed a dead, almost lightless Madison. The condition of the town was matched by Sammy's. She was dog tired, completely drained. The past week had taken almost everything she had out of her. So much so that the girl was sleeping slouched over, her head in her hands. Tom let her sleep. The poor girl needed it.

He hadn't really told her the whole story about Holly. He had not lied, exactly, but neither had he told the full story.

(CONTINUED)

Honey/Dexter Goad/79.

He was the one who forbade conventional sex with Holly, it wasn't her decision. He used the excuse of no rubbers, but the real reason was he wanted to save himself for Khyla, for when they met again. Foolishly romantic, probably. Needless, since Khyla would never know the difference, maybe. But he did it because he was still infatuated with her after four years. She burned in his memory, perhaps becoming more than she had been in real life - the more time went by the more beautiful she was in his memory and the more kind and funny she was. In any case, Holly didn't mind the hex on missionary sex, she enjoyed herself immensely. So did Tom, even if he felt he was still betraying Khyla.

He could see all that more clearly now. He had regained his perspective on Khlya, could remember her blemishes as well as her beauty. And he was certain that she had taken lovers in the five years she had lived in Los Angeles. That didn't necessarily mean she had forgotten him, or that they couldn't still get together. But she had done it. So for him to deny himself with a girl he cared about was romantic, deluding, masochism. To an extent. He was no worse off now because he had denied himself the full experience with Holly, nor was he better off. What he did from now on, since he had his blinders off, was the important thing.

A dog was howling somewhere behind him. Maybe it wasn't really a dog, Tom mused. Maybe it was a river spirit, sounding a death knell for his love of Khyla.

Paddling down a river, by yourself, at night, led to strange thoughts.

Dawn, and beyond. Sammy lifted her head sometime after five a.m. They were maybe twenty five miles from Jeffersonville.

(CONTINUED)

Honey/Dexter Goad/80.

"Jesus. My neck is sore as fuck!"

"I'll give you a neck rub when we land." Promised Tom.

That seemed to brighten her mood. It was probably the caring in his voice as much as the words. "Where are we?" She asked, much softer.

"We have about forty minutes of travel time left. When we stop I think we will be within twenty miles of the next town. That puts us right on schedule. This is the morning of the 10th."

"Well, we've got to stop for a minute. I have to use the bathroom so bad I can't stand it. Even with what happened last night."

Tom spoke carefully. "Use the plastic bowl, and then pour it over the side. With what happened last night, we can't risk going after six a.m., and we need every mile we can get."

"You owe me a long neck rub for this." She replied pleasantly enough.

"Go ahead, I won't look. And I'll let you know if there are any early morning fishermen."

She undid her pants. "I doubt if there are any fish living in this filthy water. Doesn't Ohio River stand for 'Blue River'? It must have been named two hundred years ago."

Tom smiled. "I think it was named after a tribe of Indians."

Sammy dumped the bowl. "Well, I just did my part in polluting it, so I guess I can't say much. Besides, I think it was the tribe that was named after the river."

Six a.m. They banked near an abandoned warehouse or barn. There wasn't a tree or cornstalk in sight, and they wanted somewhere they could hide.

(CONTINUED)

Honey/Dexter Goad/81.

Hopefully, it was as little used as it looked. It wouldn't do to be busted while they slept there.

Sammy stretched and worked her legs to get blood to her ankles. "I feel pretty good as long as I walk carefully. I can help you carry the canoe to the barn."

"It looks like a warehouse." He commented, picking up his side of the boat.

"Whatever. I hope it has hay in it."

It didn't. And a very unpleasant smell inhabited the junk filled building. From the look of the oily rags, machine parts, and rusting frames, the barn had once been used to house cars that were being worked on. The few windows were grimy with moldlike dust so the interior was gloomy. The aroma was a combination of decaying oil, wood rot, rust, and ancient dust.

"I'm going to puke." Sammy commented. "I am not sleeping in this hellhole."

He removed her backpack so she could climb the ladder unencumbered. "Let's go up to the loft and open a few windows."

She climbed up reluctantly. He threw up her pack before following. By the time he made it up, Sammy had all three windows open and was glaring outside. "Cocksucker!"

"What?"

"It's fucking raining again. Jesus fucking Christ."

"What are you complaining about? We made it inside in time." He stopped behind her and raised his hands for her neck rub.

She leaned back and groaned. "My neck is sore as hell."

"I need to remember to go down and hide the boat behind some machine parts before we go to sleep."

(CONTINUED)

Honey/Dexter Goad/82.

Despite her two hour nap, Sammy yawned. "It's inside, no one will be out in the rain anyway."

Tom dropped his hands. "Let's crash, I'm one tired puppy."

She helped him unroll the sleeping bag. "That wasn't much of a neck rub."

"I owe you. I'm too tired to even eat."

They stripped to their underwear and nestled together comfortably. Tom even massaged her neck a little more until his hands grew too heavy to move. Neither of them were awake when the outside door squeaked open. Neither of them heard the exclamation of surprise.

Tom woke up first and glanced at his watch, 2:25. A solid eight hours of sleep. Not bad. Two more nights of travel and it would be over. What they would do then, he had no idea. Maybe Khyla would offer them bus money. He certainly wouldn't ask. They would probably wind up hitchhiking. Slow, yes. Dangerous, probably. But it would get them to Pomeroy. The only problem would be finding somebody who was driving to small assed Pomeroy. And who didn't mind tying a boat on top of their car.

He smiled. They could always keep sailing. Go to New Orleans or something. Was there a river that went to California?

Tom leaned over and kissed Sammy's eyes and face until she stirred. She woke with a slow dreamy smile. "Morning." They kissed deeply.

"Let's eat. I'm starved." He sat up and reached for a backpack.

Sammy pulled on her socks and shoes. "I'll be back in a minute."

(CONTINUED)

Honey/Dexter Goad/83.

Tom laughed at the sight of briefs, socks, and shoes.

"Fuck you." She snapped as she climbed down.

"I just wondered something. Why do you wear briefs?"

Her tone was sarcastic. "What would you have thought if, while playing basketball, my pants slipped down and you spied silk, pink, panties?"

Tom nodded. "Good point. That would have been ugly."

Sammy started to come back up, but suddenly jumped back down.

"Tom?"

He was consuming a peanut butter sandwich. "Hmmm?"

"Where did you leave the boat?"

"Right by the door, Stevie Wonder." He washed down the quick meal.

"You better come down here." Her tone sent a chill down his spine.

Tom jumped up. The canoe was gone. There was a track in the dirt floor where it had been dragged out. "Get dressed and eat." He deadpanned.

They burst out of the barn less than ten minutes later. The rain was gone as if it had never been and the sun had come out. The ground was only slightly soggy. There was no road in sight, not even a dirt track.

"Boy, I wish I had seen those punk motherfuckers!" Sammy raged. "I would have busted their asses!"

Tom circled the barn silently. There was no sign of the boat or a trail where it had been dragged. His fists were balled, his eyes wild, but he said nothing.

She gingerly touched his arm. "It's okay, buddy."

(CONTINUED)

Honey/Dexter Goad/84.

He looked at her impassively, only his eyes showing emotion - a blind rage. She actually took a step back under the force of it.

"You were right, we should have hidden it." Conceded Sammy. Tom turned away and scanned the landscape, the river beyond. "I'm sorry, Tom."

The pain in her voice brought him out of his futile, mindless anger. He pulled her to him and embraced her. He breathed in her less than clean but still pleasant odor while squeezing her against him. "It was my call. It's not your fault." He caressed her hair and fought the sudden urge to cry. "It's over. We were making such good time. We were going to get there. Now - those rotten motherfuckers."

"Don't give up." She breathed. "There is st-" She broke away and pointed wildly. "Look! Look, Tom!"

He wheeled. Their canoe was sailing down the Ohio River. As he watched, it turned and disappeared back upstream behind a hill. The passengers were five kids, all ten years old or less. Tom whooped and grabbed his friend, lifting her off her feet and spinning her around. "They're just kids! They're playing around." He kissed her passionately.

After, she gasped for breath. "Wow. I hope you lose your temper more often."

Tom picked her up and ran for the river. "Come on."

"Do I have a choice?" She laughed, kicking her legs.

Behind the hill, the canoe was turning again, under the expert paddlekidship of the two biggest boys.

(CONTINUED)

Honey/Dexter Goad/85.

Another four kids, three boys and a girl, were sitting near the bank, either awaiting their turn or resting from already having a trip.

Tom waved to the youngsters in the boat, who returned his gesture. He set Sammy down and sat beside her. One of the boys sitting in the grass spoke up.

"Is that your boat, mister? We didn't want to wake you up, and we had planned to get it back before you got up. 'Cause we aren't stealing it or anything-"

"It's okay. Have fun. Enjoy it. Has everybody had a ride?"

The youth nodded earnestly. "I've had two."

"Good. We need it back when these guys are done, then."

"No problem." He gave the thumbs up sign.

Tom let out the pent up air, the last of his tension. He put an arm around Sammy and relaxed.

The kids even carried the canoe back to the barn. After exchanging pleasantries and life histories, they parted company. The children ran off, Tom and Sammy returned to the loft.

"I was scared." Admitted Tom. "We're so close. Nothing can go wrong now. That would be worse than if we were stopped five days ago."

"I've gone through too much to stop now. You will make the fucking deadline."

They talked idly of nothing until early evening, then ate again. After a trip to the river to brush their teeth, dirty water was better than no water and they couldn't waste what remained in their canteens, Tom sent Sammy back to the barn. "I'll be back in a minute."

(CONTINUED)

Honey/Dexter Goad/86.

He implied that he wanted to use the bathroom, which he did, but he also wanted to check out the red pickup truck parked a couple hundred yards upstream. It couldn't be the same one, but paranoia demanded that he make sure.

Trying to be casual, he sauntered past the truck. Two men were laying in the bed, a pillow under each one's head. The fatter of two sat up, the bandage on his nose was prominent. "Why, hello. You saved us the trouble of waiting until you made your break to the river tonight." Roger stated snidely.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

Parks, looking much the worse for wear, sat up. His various visible bruises had yellowed and were beginning to fade. He glowered.

"Haven't you had enough yet, Parks?" Tom sighed.

"I'm not getting anymore, boy. You two are. I was drunk last time, or-"

Tom waved that off. "Whatever. See you later." He started to turn.

Roger produced a revolver, the weapon formally inexpertly wielded by his companion. "Uh-uh. Following my public announcement about you kidnapping Samantha, several neighborhood girls came forward with stories about me...horrible stories that are completely untrue. But the police believe them. They now assume that either Sammy ran away from me with you, or that I did something to the two of you. Me! Murder you two, and then say you kidnapped her? They have flighty imaginations. In any case, I am a wanted man, as is Mr. Parks here for an offense you are well aware of.

(CONTINUED)

Honey/Dexter Goad/87.

So tell me, boy, what do either of us have to lose by shooting you? You move another step, and you will have the answer to that question."

Tom faced the copulant man grimly. How had it come to this?

Roger jerked a head in the direction of barn. "I'm going to get the delectable Miss Wilder. Watch him." He passed over the pistol and climbed out of the truck laboriously. "I had estimated your travel time so I was in Ripley about the time you were. The news report about a public kidnapping was interesting. So when I spotted you, Sammy, and a man fitting the kidnapper's description riding in a truck to a motel, I was intrigued. I intercepted him as he started to leave the motel after dropping you off. I think you can figure out the rest." He lumbered off.

Tom waited until the foster father was out of earshot. "What are you planning? Rape? Torture? Murder? What are you hoping to achieve?"

Parks straightened his collar reflexively. The grip on the pistol was easy. "Rape? Give me a break. I'm not a homosexual, and if a girl doesn't have a pubic hair I don't want it." He grinned sarcastically. "So you two are safe."

"What do you think is on that pervert's mind?" Tom jerked a thumb in the direction Roger had gone.

The gunman frowned. "He said the charges against him were fabricated. Motivated by greed."

"Please. Are you that stupid?"

"If she wasn't such a bitch, I'd stop him." Parks mused. "But she hurt me, bad. I guess she deserves what she gets." He shrugged.

(CONTINUED)

Honey/Dexter Goad/88.

Tom sagged. "Don't let it happen, man. I'm begging you. You can beat me, or whatever you're going to do, but don't let him hurt her. You don't want this on your conscience."

Parks chuckled. "You belong in soap operas. Any more cornball lines?"

"You can't fool me, Parks. I saw you when you thought you had killed Sammy. You were miserable. I'll bet you've never gotten that drunk in your life. Why? Because you thought you were a murderer. Robbery, assault, those are one thing. But taking somebody's life? That's heavy. Too heavy for you. I seen it in you."

Parks moistened his lips. "I wasn't pissed off when we found her alive." He hedged.

"And you don't want her rape on your conscience either."

The man glanced at the direction of the barn. "He's taking an awful long time to find her. Let's check it out."

Tom smiled. "I owe you one, buddy."

"I'm not doing you any favors."

"I mean it."

Roger met them at the barn doors, glaring at Tom. "Where is she?"

The boy tried to see around the man into the barn, a nearly impossible task. "Sammy?"

"She's not in there. I looked everywhere."

"Fuck, I don't know. I told her to come back here"

Roger gestured for Parks to bring Tom in. "Sit on the ladder and be quiet."

(CONTINUED)

Honey/Dexter Goad/89.

Tom noticed that the canoe, which had been right side up and leaning against the wall was upside down. Although the middle wasn't flush with the floor, he couldn't see inside.

Parks was talking to Roger. "I'll bet she saw you coming and ran for help. Or hid outside until you went in and then ran for help."

The larger man was doubtful. "I don't think so. I know her well. She doesn't run from much, unless that is her only option. Sammy fights. That's all she knows how to do. She wouldn't abandon her friend here. She's somewhere outside, waiting in ambush or plotting something."

"So what do we do?"

"Tie Superboy to that ladder and go search for her. Spring her trap and capture her."

Parks covered Tom with the pistol while Roger tied him securely with several electrical cords. "There." The huge man patted the boy on the head. "I've got a better idea. She might sneak in here and release him while we are searching. I'll take the gun and search. You stay here by the door in case she tries anything funny."

"Good enough."

The foster father departed. Parks took up his position by the big swinging door, clutching a rusty pipe.

Tom waited a couple minutes, trying to keep from looking at the overturned canoe. "The way you two act, you'd think Sammy was Arnold Swartzenegger."

"Seems ridiculous, doesn't it?" Parks agreed, completely disappointing Tom, who was trying to anger the man.

(CONTINUED)

Honey/Dexter Goad/90.

If he could lure Parks over to him, if only to hit him, then Sammy could be on the older man before Parks could turn back around.

"Have you ever been hit by her?"

"Yeah." Tom agreed ruefully.

"How can arms that skinny hit so hard?"

The boy pondered that. "What mass she does have is pure muscle, no fat whatsoever. Throw in unlimited willpower, anger and raging hormones and you have hell in sneakers."

Parks gestured his agreement.

"Hey, my shit is going dead. Can you loosen my binds a little?"

The man sniffed his amusement. "Wasn't you just telling me how smart I am.?"

"I'm serious. I can't feel my arms."

"If you try anything, I'll pound you ass into the dirt. You dig?"

Tom nodded. "I couldn't even lift my arms right now. That asshole Roger was trying to cut off my arms."

"Hey Parks!" Sammy called from outside the barn door. "I've got the gun! Back up until I can see you through the window beside the door!" She appeared in that window, brandishing the revolver.

Parks froze, indecisive.

Tom grinned exuberantly. "Better do it, buddy. She's crazy. She'll start firing through the wall."

"I'm backing up!" The man called out wisely dropping the pipe.

When he was beside Tom, Sammy limped in. Her hair and clothes were disheveled.

(CONTINUED)

Honey/Dexter Goad/91.

A large spot of crimson blood gleamed wetly on the sleeve of her flannel shirt. Her right hand was freshly bruised and a little swollen. It hung loosely at her side. She clutched the gun in her left. She was limping extremely badly, the excruciating pain of walking was evident on her pale face. It was only her will power that enabled her to walk.

"What have you done to Roger?" Parks asked in awe.

"I was hiding on the roof. There is a ladder in the loft leading to the roof. I dropped down on him. Unfortunately for him, he didn't stay down. He wanted to fight." She giggled, drunk on pain. "He is going to need a dentist." She beamed at Tom, who was also looking at her in awe. "Untie him."

She tried to advance another step to supervise, but her left foot came down on the discarded pipe. The weird angle her foot twisted was too much. Sammy cried out in agony as she slammed to the floor. Her gun skittered across to the far wall.

Parks charged the girl. He knelt beside her, rolled her over, and raised a fist. Sammy seized a double handful of his exposed genitals and mashed her hands closed. "Oh, God!" He groaned, folding like a poker player with no pairs and no card over nine.

Sammy rose to her knees vengefully, left hand, which was unhurt, balling up.

"No, Sammy. That's enough! Leave him alone!"

She dismissed him with a scowling glance.

"I owe him! I'll explain later. But please, for me. That's good enough."

Sammy sighed, dropped her fist, and crawled to him.

(CONTINUED)

Honey/Dexter Goad/92.

While she untied him, he spoke quickly. "You are awesome, Sammy! Absolutely awesome! I can't believe it. I thought you were hiding under the boat because it was rightside up."

"I guess fat boy turned it over while he was looking for me. Why, I can't imagine. Maybe he kicked it in frustration." Her voice was shaky. When he was released and turned to look at her, she was trembling.

He embraced her and tried to cover every square inch of her face with a kiss. "I love you." He repeated between each smooch. She responded weakly, and looked ready to faint in his arms.

"I hurt my goddamn ankles again. Fuck! It hurts like hell!"

"Lay here. I'll drag Roger in here and tie them up. We will call the police in Jeffersonville and tell them where to pick up the garbage."

Tom changed his mind after the considerable job of dragging a thoroughly beaten and unconscious Roger inside. The boy had seen plates of chop suey look better than the foster father's face. The blood on her shirt wasn't hers. "I've decided not to tie you up, Parks." He said as he secured Roger. Parks had vomited but still couldn't sit up. "If you get away before the police arrive here, fine. That will make us even, okay?"

The man nodded stiffly.

Sammy was pawing through Roger's wallet. "He won't need this hundred and fifty dollars in jail." She spat. "And we can stay in a motel the next couple of days. That should pay for what he did to my right hand." She regarded the abused knuckles. "He fucked my hand up."

(CONTINUED)

Tom checked the time. It was only five twenty. It had seemed like much longer had passed. This day was taking forever. "We'll set sail now, go to within a couple miles of Jeffersonville, stop and walk into town to call the police." He spoke to Parks. "I'm going to have to trust you on a couple things. I hope you don't untie this pervert and let him go. I'm going to trust your good sense on that. And I don't think you will continue to follow us and bother us. We don't want to hurt anyone. We just want to be left alone. If you bother us again, I swear to God I won't stop Sammy this time. I've pulled her off your sorry hide twice. I'll let her do what she wants next time. I'll even help her."

CHAPTER TWELVE

Sammy slept on the entire hour plus trip to the outskirts of Jeffersonville. Tom stashed the canoe in an inland forest and carried his friend into town. He bought a set of crutches so Sammy could stand by herself and move around if she had to. Then he called the state police, informing them that a wanted man had been seen in an abandoned barn on the river eighteen miles east of Jeffersonville. Tom gave enough details of the surrounding countryside that they would be sure to find him and hung up. He took Sammy the three miles back to the canoe and waited for eight thirty to roll around. She dozed on his shoulder while he carried her, then rested her head in his lap while he sat.

When it was time to go, he roused her. She groaned. "Oh, man. I hurt all over. My hand is killing me the most." She held up the extremity. It was swollen to twice its normal size.

He didn't comment until they were on the water. "That was incredible, what you did back there."

(CONTINUED)

Honey/Dexter Goad/94.

Foolish, crazy, dangerous ... but unbelievable too. How did you knock out someone four times your size?"

Although Tom couldn't see her, Sammy shrugged. "I hit him until he stopped moving."

When he could stifle his laughter, Tom asked. "Why did you let him touch you when you lived in his house? You never back down, and you just proved that you can take him."

"If I beat his fat ass then I would have been sent to another foster home. Away from you. I couldn't let that happen, so I tolerated it. If he tried to do more, I would have held him off as long as possible, then maybe ran away or something and let you know where I was hiding out."

Tom absorbed that soberly. "I meant what I said earlier. I love you, Samantha."

She was silent for so long he thought she had fallen asleep again. When she spoke, it was obvious that she had been crying, something she detested with a passion. "Too bad Khylla, you had your chance." She mumbled softly. He wasn't even sure he was intended to hear it. Louder, she said. "I'm going to take a nap. I am drained."

"Never fear, I have the helm."

Jeffersonville and New Albany fell within an hour of each other. When both were behind him, Tom set his sights on Tell City, 95 miles from Albany. They just might make it tonight. He hoped so. They could stay in a Tell City motel during the daylight hours of the 11th. That gave them only seventy miles to transverse the last night. That would be a piece of cake.

(CONTINUED)

Honey/Dexter Goad/95.

Tom smiled to himself. Barring unforeseen delays, they would make it in plenty of time.

"The stars are beautiful." Sammy whispered.

Tom jumped. "Oh, awake are we? Well, start paddling, buddy. We need every ounce of speed we can get."

"Okay. What time is it?"

"Two ten. I hope that we are about fifty miles from Tell City."

Sammy paddled silently a minute. "What about your father? What happened to him?"

Tom pondered that. "Richard Smith. A lazy, good for nothing, bum. When my mom was first diagnosed with cancer, ten years ago, Richard left her. He saw the medical bills that were ahead and sailed away. I used to idolize him...until I was old enough to have some sense. And then he left. That was kind of like the final straw, you know?"

"He sounds like a real punk." Sammy sounded annoyed.

Tom smiled fondly at a long distant memory. "I remember being six years old. I was small as hell, I didn't grow quickly until later. At that time, I didn't even come up to my mom's waist, I was a tiny little guy. My mom would give me money to run across the street to a bar and get her favorite candy bar when she got a craving for it. At that time, she was sick and couldn't get around very well. A friend bought the groceries for us, I did the laundry at the mat down the street, etc. Sometimes she would want her favorite candy bar called a Bun, from the bar.

(CONTINUED)

Honey/Dexter Goad/96.

I would open the door, which weighed more than I did, everybody would be in there smoking and drinking and it seemed like every single person in the bar would turn and look at me. There were patronizing grins, drunken laughter, even glares, which I didn't understand. A waitress; always the same one, I don't think she ever took a day off; would come over and say 'what you want, huh?' She was large breasted, long haired, and fairly young. She had green eyes, freckles, and reddish brown hair. She always scared me. Something about the way she looked at me, or maybe the fact that she was three times my size. I would hold out a dollar bill that dwarfed my hand and say 'May I have two Buns, please?' And everybody in the place within earshot would laugh. Sometimes, when a band was playing, that was mercifully few. Sometimes she would pretend she couldn't hear me and make me say it louder. She would wink and answer 'You can have my two buns anytime, darling'. After I stood there red-faced long enough, she would give me two of the Bun candy bars, which she always had with her because she knew what I wanted. But she wouldn't take my money although she pretended to in case anybody was paying attention. One time she whispered to me 'Your mom needs every dollar she's got, darling. But don't tell her she ain't paying!' My mom used to work at that bar. It was only later that I realized my mom and that waitress were best friends. I was always asleep when the waitress got off work and came over to see my mom. In the mornings, before my mom woke up, I used to sneak in her bedroom and slip the dollar back into her purse."

They fell into a companionable silence, each lost in their own memories.

(CONTINUED)

Honey/Dexter Goad/97.

Sammy stared at his back in the moonlight as she paddled. After a half hour, she broke the silence. "It's the 11th, now. You're going to be sixteen tomorrow. How does that make you feel?"

"Sad, in a way. I'm not a kid anymore. Actually, I haven't felt like much of a kid since mom broke up with the last of the men she lived with four years ago. I was kind of the man of the house. I've been doing chores, not because I was told to, but because I had to, every since I can remember. My mother was old when she had me, thirty-five, that didn't give me much of a chance to have a normal childhood."

"Thirty-five is old?"

"It is to be having your first child. It is if you are going to get cancer at forty-one."

Sammy chewed on her lower lip. "She didn't know that was going to happen when she made the decision to have you."

Tom shrugged. "I'm certainly not blaming her. She never got a break in life."

"I have a confession to make." She told him suddenly.

"This seems to be the trip to make confessions on."

"I did know my parents. They committed suicide together when I was six."

Tom was startled. "Why the hell did they do that?"

"Let me start at the beginning. My parents met in High School and almost immediately my mom got pregnant. She was sixteen. They quit school, got married, and started working at a local factory in Greensboro, North Carolina. Times were tough, but they loved each other and were happy. They loved their son, Sammy Thomas Wilder, even more. They adored and worshipped the boy.

(CONTINUED)

Honey/Dexter Goad/98.

And he did little to disappoint them. He was a straight A student, won awards in track, football, and basketball. When he was eighteen, he was offered a scholarship at six different colleges to play football. He chose to go to Duke so that he could live with his parents. He starred at cornerback for four years there, as well as being named an academic all American. His last home game he set a Duke record with four interceptions in one game, two of which he returned for touchdowns. Those four balls used to sit on the mantle above the fireplace, right along beside the bookcase filled with his various awards and honors. My brother was drafted in the fourth round by the Cincinnati BENGALS after he graduated. He signed a four year contract worth several million dollars. My parents moved to Cincinnati and quit their jobs. Their financial woes were over. Sammy still lived with them, except during training camp. Of course my parents attended every practice.

"My brother played well the first couple preseason games. He had a couple interceptions and wasn't beat deep, etc. The coaches were talking about starting him. In the third preseason game my brother collided with a New York Giants running back and had to be carried off the field. The doctors told him that he was paralyzed from the waist down, for life. My parents assured him that they would take care of him, that everything would turn out all right. But Sammy wouldn't hear of it. The third day after his injury, after my parents went home for the day, my brother drank six glasses of rat poison. Half a box was found beside him on the floor. The speculation was that one of his friends from the team brought it in.

(CONTINUED)

Honey/Dexter Goad/99.

Those were the only other visitors, and they could empathize with his situation. The autopsy revealed that the initial prognosis was wrong. There was no nerve damage, the swelling had temporarily paralyzed him. He wouldn't have played football again, but he would have been able to walk or do anything else he wanted.

"My parents, crushed, decided to have another son. They were each thirty-eight, so were still young enough to raise the kid. They had me the next year. As you have probably guessed, they were bitterly disappointed that I was a girl. They named me Sammy, however, and raised me as if I were a boy. Meanwhile, mom kept trying to have another kid and kept miscarriaging. She was in her forties, had carried two kids, and just couldn't bring another to full term.

"I had a strange early childhood. Male clothes, male toys, male games. My parents made friends with several families in the neighborhood who had all male children and encouraged me to play with those kids. They had me brainwashed into believing that I was a boy. When I got old enough for school they enrolled me as a boy, evidently my father had gotten a fake birth certificate made, and warned me to always use the stall in the boy's bathroom if I had to go. They kept my hair short, and had taught me how to fight. My father asked me almost every day if I had stood up for myself that day. They made sure I was at every neighborhood pickup baseball and football game. You get the idea. I also heard everything about my brother, many times. It was his room, his old clothes, and his old toys that I used. But I never got the feeling that I was good enough, because I had been born the wrong sex.

(CONTINUED)

"When I was six and mom was forty-five, she finally carried a baby full term. They were both ecstatic, and for the first time the pressure on me lessened. If I didn't bring home straight As on my report card, Dad skipped the stern lecture about what my brother had accomplished at my age. He used to actually dig out my brother's first and second grade report cards and compare them to mine. As my mother's baby grew that ceased. But the baby was a stillborn. Ironically, it was another girl. Three days later, they committed suicide. Yes, with rat poison. I suspect that the doctors told my mother she couldn't try anymore. That it might kill her. In any case, the three day wait and the rat poison were hardly coincidences."

Tom found his voice after a long moment. "I'm s--"

"Don't say that!" She snapped. "I didn't say it to you. You don't know anything but what I told you, so how can you feel sorry for me? In fact, I don't want you to feel sorry for me. And don't you fucking dare say you know how I feel. How can you unless you went through exactly what I did? I hate motherfuckers that go around saying 'I know how you feel'! I hate that!"

"I hear you." Tom soothed. "You're right. It was a habitual thing I said, there was no thought behind it." He waited, but she had said her piece on the subject. "You don't sound like you hate them."

Sammy spoke softly. "I don't. They were sick, they needed help. They warped me, but they didn't put me through hell. I pity them, I feel sad when I think of them. I sometimes wonder if they didn't suffocate my brother. If he killed himself to escape them. But I don't hate them."

(CONTINUED)

Honey/Dexter Goad/101.

How can I when I never saw them be really happy? They were more imprisoned than I was.

"And as you might have guessed, a lot of that stuff has stayed with me. I'm always getting into fights. I like to play boys' games. I talk like a boy. I dress like one. I have a lot of boyish mannerisms. So it was no wonder that you mistook me for a boy that first day. And you can see why playing a boy for you appealed to me so much. Sure, being your friend was most of it, but part of me wanted to act completely like a boy again, as I did for my father. Obviously, all of my foster parents treated me like a girl. I wanted to be a boy again."

"I see." Tom replied cautiously.

"I have come to realize in the last couple days that I don't want that anymore. I want to be a girl. Your girl, Tom."

"I see."

She stopped paddling and eased forward to the middle bench so that she could touch his back. "I know I'm not much, and I have some rough edges."

"Now it's your turn to shut up." He said somewhat angrily. "Don't start selling yourself short. You have a stronger willpower than both your parents, your brother, Roger, and Parks combined. You don't weigh a hundred pounds in a suit of armor and you cuss every third word. So what? You want to fight everybody, the bigger they are the better. I don't care. I'll take you over Miss America any day."

"There you go with that weight shit again. I'm telling you, I weigh 105 pounds."

(CONTINUED)

"Did you have a dozen rolls of quarters in your pockets when you weighed yourself?"

Sammy rapped his back lightly with her knuckles. "You smartass. You're just trying to rattle my cage."

"Clothes weigh something, you know. My clothes and shoes weigh five pounds ..."

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Dawn. Five thirty. "Fuck, I wish I knew how close we were to Tell City." Tom commented. "I don't think we are making good time."

Sammy blinked out of her semi doze. They hadn't talked in hours. Each night, towards the end of the trip for that night, they lapsed into quiet reflection and mindless paddling. Only to use the bathroom did one of them break the routine. "Where are we supposed to be?" She yawned.

"About twenty miles from Tell City. But I don't see any light ahead."

"You wouldn't see none from twenty miles out anyway."

Tom shook his head wearily. "I saw Cincinnati from three hours, or thirty miles, away."

"Well that's Cincinnati." She replied proudly.

He was amused. "Your guess is as good as mine where we are. We will go till about seven o'clock, stash the boat, and walk to town or until we reach a motel, whichever comes first."

"You will walk, maybe." Sammy commented.

Again he chuckled. He was getting punch-drunk on affection for her. Everything she did or said seemed either funny or adorable, where an outside observer wouldn't think so.

(CONTINUED)

Around seven they hit the bank near a grove of trees. Tom was comforted by the fact that he could now see signs of Tell City about five miles downstream. That was only an hour or two's walk which wasn't bad. After they hid the boat, Sammy jumped on his back and they headed off.

She rested her face on the back of his head and dozed while he walked. Five minutes down the road, a van stopped beside them.

The driver and only occupant, a gray haired bushy bearded man, called out in a friendly tone. "You kids are up early for a Sunday. Your friend looks like he wanted to stay in bed."

"She's got two sprained ankles. I'm carrying her home to Tell City." Tom commented.

The man grinned. "It's a girl? I'm sorry. Climb aboard. You can lay in the back if you want. I'll have you in town in five minutes. My name's Paul."

Tom pulled open the side door, laying a dozing Sammy on the floor, and hopped in. "Thanks Mr. Paul. This will save us an hour."

"Oh, call me Paul. I've never been the 'Mr.' type." The man rambled on kindly about his delivery job until the van was in downtown Tell City. "Well, here you go. Get her in bed. She looks like somebody that washed up on a beach."

"I'll do that, Paul. Thanks."

Sammy didn't wake until Tom had her in the hotel room and was undressing her. "Pervert." She mumbled.

"Go back to sleep. We're in Tell City. Lift up." He ordered, and pulled off her jeans. "Damn, your ankles are swelled more than before."

(CONTINUED)

Honey/Dexter Goad/104.

It seems like forever since you've been able to walk."

She curled up, pulling the covers over her thin shoulders. Soon he had joined her. "It won't be long now, honey. One more day."

"You call me 'honey' again and I'll smash you." Yawned Sammy.

He fell asleep smiling at her.

He woke up listening to the shower. "Goddamn her." He muttered. "She does this shit on purpose." It was in such a mood that he barged into the bathroom and opened the shower curtain.

Sammy was sitting in the tub, rinsing lathered soap off, singing softly. She was startled, but made no attempt to cover herself. She looked up at him wide-eyed.

"Fucking hot water hog. Are you about done?" He tried to stay angry, but his eyes betrayed him.

"Come on in." She invited, scooting up.

Tom disrobed and climbed in. She stared openly, as much in curiosity as in desire. She turned to face him as he sat down, raising up on her knees while taking care not to jar her damaged ankles. With one hand she shut off the shower and turned on the bath faucet. She plugged the drain before turning her full attention on him.

She washed him carefully, missing nothing, while he watched her. When he was lathered and rinsed, she let out the drain. She sat back, getting off her bony knees, and waited for his move. Tom got up and stepped out of the tub. Seeing Sammy's crushed look, he tossed her a towel. "Not here. You're too banged up. I don't want to hurt you."

(CONTINUED)

Honey/Dexter Goad/105.

She regarded him suspiciously but dried herself off. He carried her nude to the bed. He kissed her to ease her nervousness, working lower until he was in a position to show her that what she had termed "gross" was anything but that.

"What's wrong with you? Your clothes are all messed up!"

Parks drove.

He remembered voices from the past.

His parents raised him to dress nicely.

To groom himself.

To look respectable.

To look nice.

Always.

They couldn't understand when he came home disheveled.

And when they didn't understand ...

... they punished.

He didn't like to think about that ...

... but he couldn't stop himself.

Bad memories died hard.

A girl had beaten him up in school that day.

She hurt him.

She messed up his clothes.

She got him in trouble with his parents.

What his parents did that day ...

... burned.

He still had the scars.

His parents had been drunk.

Maybe they went too far.

(CONTINUED)

Honey/Dexter Goad/106.

But he couldn't forget it.

He was never dressed unnicely again.

Until now.

He knew where they were.

Roger had figured it out.

They traveled ten miles an hour.

They liked to stay in bigger towns in motels.

They liked to hide their boat in out of the way places...

... a couple miles from the town.

He knew he could find it.

He knew how to punish them now.

He had remembered it.

Parks drove.

Six o'clock p.m. Except for bathroom breaks and a quick bite to eat, they had been in bed for five hours. They were sweat drenched and their boundless youthful energy had finally been exhausted. Sammy was resting her head on Tom's stomach, he idly played with her soaked hair. They had no words for each other, their contentment and relaxed exhaustion were too great.

Sammy rolled off him, stretched, groaned from old pains and new soreness and sighed. Her voice was soft, feminine. "Jesus Christ, we have to get moving. It's six o'clock. It's at least an hour walk to the boat."

"Fuck it. Fuck Khyla." He moaned.

"I didn't go through all this to hear that. I can't walk, Tom. I paid the price so you could honor your word."

He sat up. "We need to jump in the shower again."

(CONTINUED)

"Obviously." She kissed his chest as he carried her. There was an odd, new, passiveness in her that he didn't like. He hoped that it was not permanent. He needed her strength more than he cared to admit.

Sammy's short energy reserves were tapped. She dozed again as she rode his back. Her sweet breath tickled his ear, warming his entire body with love for her. He felt boundless, unstoppable. She weighed nothing, he never tired.

Well, not for the first couple miles. Then his exertions got the best of him and he had to set her down.

"What's up, Tom?" She rubbed her eyes.

"I'm bushed. We are going to start late as hell. It's after seven now. Thankfully, we only have seventy five miles to go. Eight hour trip, tops."

Sammy smiled lovingly. "We'll make it. Quit fretting."

He gathered her up again. "What a lovely evening. The weather is just perfect."

"Funny, I was just thinking the same thing."

They joined in laughter, sharing the weird sense of humor that only new lovers seem to have, when everything is delightful, when birds that had been singing all along were suddenly noticed. Sammy squeezed her budding breasts against his back. "What will we do after dusk tomorrow?"

"I don't know." He replied tightly. "We have about a hundred dollars left. I want to check in a motel room during the day tomorrow so we can get cleaned up and rest a bit before meeting Khyla."

"What if she doesn't show up?"

(CONTINUED)

Honey/Dexter Goad/108.

Tom smiled to himself. "If she doesn't show up, I say we keep sailing. All the way to New Orleans. Fuck it."

Sammy squeezed him again. Wherever he went, she would follow. "Even if she is there, we can do that. Maybe she will loan you some money."

He reached up to caress the hands, that were encircling his chest. "I was joking. We have to go home. You need to go back to school in the fall, as do I. Hopefully, the next foster home you go to will be close to me. Roger revealed to me that we have been absolved of any wrong doing by the police, they are not searching for us, so there is no reason to not go home."

"What? Are you crazy? I'm not living in no fucking foster home anymore! I'm tired of them! I'm living with you, Tom." There was heavy finality in her voice.

"You forget, honey, I have a sixteenth birthday tomorrow. That means I can drive. You will never be far from me."

"Each time you call me 'honey' is another asswhipping you got coming when I can walk again."

Chuckling, Tom rubbed her hand soothingly. "What is it with you and the word 'honey?'"

"A 'honey' is some fluffy big titty slut that jumps on a chair when a mouse runs by. Do I fit any of the above categories?"

"Hardly."

Twenty-five till eight p.m. The sun was down, but the sky was still bright. Soon, the light would follow the sun. Tom set Sammy down, removed the crutches from where they had been secured to her backpack, and gave them to her. Then he disappeared into the grove of trees, only to return in moments, looking defeated.

(CONTINUED)

Honey/Dexter Goad/109.

"It's gone. The son of a bitch is gone again."

"Sure this is the right place?" Inquired Sammy, rubbernecking around, trying to spot another grove.

Tom threw up his hands "I seen the place where we had it. There were marks on the dirt."

Parks appeared from behind the grove. He was wearing a perfectly ironed black three piece suit. His tie was properly knitted and arranged. His dress shoes gleamed. A red handkerchief peeked out of his left jacket pocket. His hair was immaculate. His face was freshly shaved. He was carrying a polished black briefcase.

From the look in his eyes, he had completely flipped his wig.

"It was not that hard to find your hiding place." He stated impassively. "This is the only real cover for half a mile. I drove and kept checking places near the water. There is a danger inherent in becoming predictable." He set the briefcase on the grass beside him. "I am glad that we are all here." As he set the briefcase down, both of them heard the strangest thing.

It sounded like a combination of glass jingling and liquid splashing.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

"Roger?" Sammy asked dangerously.

"He was still tied up when I left him."

Tom stepped forward. "I warned you to leave us alone Where is our fucking boat?"

Parks waved a hand idly toward the river.

"You threw it in the river!?"

(CONTINUED)

"The two of you will not be needing it anymore."

"You son of-" Tom charged the much bigger man, who cuffed him viciously. The boy landed on the ground with a meaty thud. Parks began kicking him.

Sammy crouched behind the man and raised one of the crutches. Parks wheeled, caught the weapon, and ripped it from her grasp. Without hesitation, she swung the other crutch between his legs. There was a hollow thud. Parks ripped that from her grip as well and threw them both in the river. "I purchased an athletic cup, my dear. Two times was enough." And then he hit her.

Tom staggered to his feet as his friend flew to the grass and was still. Parks walked calmly to his briefcase, pausing above it to straighten his hair. The boy hurled himself at the priming man, his flying tackle clipping the man at the knees. They rolled together until Parks was on top.

The bigger man subdued the boy with two savage blows.

Parks rose elegantly to his feet, straightened his tie, and brushed the dirt off his knees. There was a smudge on one elbow that couldn't be removed. He grimaced and went to the river. A little water cleared it up somewhat. Feeling better, he surveyed his two victims. Tom was laying spread-eagled, in a daze. One eye was already swelling. The girl was nowhere in sight.

Parks searched the trees methodically, finding no sign of the girl. When he returned to where Tom lay, his briefcase was missing. He knelt by the still form. "All right, little girl! Come out with my briefcase or I will break his neck!"

Then he happened to glance down at the person laying down, whom he had only glanced at since returning from his search.

(CONTINUED)

Honey/Dexter Goad/111.

The person was laying on their stomach, face concealed, but on close inspection, it was obviously Sammy. He looked behind him sharply, just in time to get a face full of heavy briefcase.

The man flew back, his nose exploding, until he landed supine. Tom charged in and started his own kicking contest. Sammy raised up to her hands and knees, crawling forward swiftly. Parks recovered and swept the Tom's feet out from underneath him with a kick. The red head leaped to his own feet before Sammy could reach him. "Look what you have done!" The man slobbered, blowing out gobs of blood colored spit as he raged. "Now I'm all messed up!"

Tom rolled to his feet, swaying slightly as a dizzy spell hit him. Sammy pulled up beside him, chest heaving from the last five minutes exertions. "Leave now, Parks, and we are even." The boy wheezed, as tired as his friend. "Even though you stole our boat."

Parks looked lost. He seemed to be wondering how he had come to be standing in front of two battered kids with blood gushing from his nose and mouth onto his suit. *Why couldn't you have stopped at some other gas station?* His eyes seemed to ask. *Why couldn't I have been watching a Star Trek rerun instead of the news report on you the night before?* *None of this would have happened.* Perhaps that was what he was thinking. Or maybe he wasn't thinking much at all. "Oh, I have got to punish you." He bent and recovered his briefcase.

The two friends were eyeing the container. "What do you have in there?" Asked Tom, remembering how heavy it was. How it had sloshed in his hands.

(CONTINUED)

Honey/Dexter Goad/112.

"Take off your clothes." He ordered grimly. There was absolutely nothing sexual in his gaze. Only madness.

Tom squeezed Sammy's hand. "Crawl away as fast as you can. Hide somewhere. I will delay him."

The look Sammy shot at him suggested that he had just asked her to cut off her left hand and eat it. She didn't budge.

Parks was studying them clinically, seemingly unaware of their conversation.

"Sammy, I won't tell you again. Move your ass!" Her friend hissed.

She inspected her left hand, as if wondering how many times she could hit Parks before it would be in as bad of shape as her right hand. She didn't budge.

"You bitch! Move your goddamn fucking 'honey' ass!"

She leaned over and kissed his cheek. She didn't budge.

Parks was through fiddling in his briefcase. They could hear bottles and metal objects click together. He returned his attention to them and appeared to regain his hearing. "Come along. Take your clothes off. We do not have all day."

"Fuck you."

"Stick it up your ass."

Parks closed the briefcase, locked it, brushed the loose grass off the bottom, and placed it aside. He stood sternly. He advanced on the kneeling couple. Tom attacked with another flying tackle. This time the man braced and did not fall. Instead he kned the boy in the teeth. Sammy was scuttling forward quickly. Parks danced around her, seized both arms, and lifted her up by them. She squealed, writhed, and cursed, to no avail.

(CONTINUED)

Honey/Dexter Goad/113.

She tried to put her weight on her feet to get some leverage, but couldn't even do that anymore.

The red headed man shifted his grip on her to the lower chest. Slowly, painfully, he tightened his grip every time she exhaled. He ignored her hands, which flayed at the skin of his wrists and hands. Soon blood was pouring freely, but he kept up the suffocating grip.

By the time Tom regained his senses and his feet, Sammy was slumped over in Parks' arms. Hands, feet and head dangling. "Your clothes, Mr. Smith." Parks suggested. "This instant, or I'll rip her eyes out." One bleeding, clawlike hand, hovered over Sammy's face.

The boy was defeated. He stripped as fast as he could, wiping his mouth on his tee-shirt when he was done.

Parks tenderly lay Sammy on the ground before him and fumbled with her socks. She had been shoeless since her ankles swelled up too much to allow for them. While he was distracted, Sammy sat up and coldcocked him with her left hand. The stunned man sat back on his heels. Tom was there, briefcase in hand. He swung the fifty pound weapon in an arc, slamming it into Parks' throat hard enough that the boy was forced to drop it.

Parks gasped and clawed at his shattered windpipe. He landed on his back and thrashed his limbs wildly. Tom joined the man frantically, but there was nothing the boy could do. By the time the man died, Sammy was beside her friend, embracing him.

Tom was crying. "I killed him." His voice was hushed.

(CONTINUED)

"It was him or us." She consoled, wiping his tears and the blood with her removed shirt.

He felt for Parks' pulse. "He's dead. I can't believe he's dead."

She wiped his chin and neck. "You warned him. We were minding our own business. He kept bothering us."

Tom pulled away from her, seized the briefcase, and hurled it against a nearby tree. They could hear glass breaking in it. "This doesn't make any fucking sense! I didn't want to kill anybody!" He kicked the black case into another tree. More glass broke. "Why didn't I aim for his goddamn head!?"

"Tom ... " Samantha sobbed weakly. She was exhausted.

The boy raced to the fallen man and kicked him. "You crazy motherfucker!" He punctuated each stressed word with a savage kick. "Why? I don't fucking understand! Why! Why?"

A bony, determined grip caught his kicking leg. "I tricked him. I pretended to be knocked out. That gave you the chance to kill him. So kick me, too." She released him, meeting his gaze with tear reddened eyes. "I disobeyed you. I stayed when you told me to go. So kick me, too. Please."

It was the absence of fire in her eyes that did it. She was done. She had nothing left. She had to depend on him to get them to Evansville. He couldn't fail her.

"At least, if we make it in time, his death will mean a little something." He ventured. "Otherwise, it will mean absolutely nothing at all."

Sammy wilted, resting her head in her hands. She didn't have enough energy left in her body to set toilet paper on fire.

(CONTINUED)

Honey/Dexter Goad/115.

"How will we get there?"

Tom knelt in front of her so that she could climb on his back. She did so. Feebly. She rested her face against his head.

"I guess we will walk." He sighed grimly.

"I can't believe I killed him." Tom blurted after an hour and a half of walking. They avoided Tell City, taking roads around it. Tom stopped in a gas station bathroom so they could wash up and change clothes. Walking around bloody in public wasn't a bright idea. Now, it was dark and the town was behind him. The next town of any size ahead was Evansville, seventy miles away.

Samantha murmured sleepily. "You had to."

"I know."

"What are we going to do afterwards?" She asked again.

She was going to keep asking until she heard an answer she liked. "We can't get married until you are eighteen, because there is no parent to consent to it."

"I think to age without parental consent in Ohio is sixteen." She commented.

"Sixteen, then. What do you want to do?" He shot back. Better to turn the tables.

Samantha mused for a long moment. "The first thing I want to do is stay in bed for a week straight."

"In other words, you have no better idea than I do what we are going to do?"

"No, I don't." She admitted.

"I guess we will have to wait and see, then."

(CONTINUED)

Tom walked silently for a while. When he spoke again, it was in a reflective voice. "Last year in school, my teacher asked us all to write a three page essay. The premise was, you have ten days to live. You can do anything or talk to anybody you want to. We had to write about what we would do, who we would talk to, and what we would say to them. We were supposed to turn it in on a Tuesday after a three day weekend. I thought about it all weekend and finally starting writing Monday. I got an 'F' on my paper. Do you know what I wrote?"

"I couldn't guess." Samantha whispered.

"I wrote that I would go to heaven and talk to God. I would ask him why I had to die. Why anybody had to die. My teacher said that heaven wasn't a place you could go to and God wasn't a person you could talk to. I said 'you said we could go anywhere and talk to anyone!' She answered 'You know what I meant!' So I replied. 'Then you're saying that heaven and God don't exist?' She got shitty and said 'You are missing the whole point of the assignment. The "F" stands. Return to your seat.' Maybe I still don't get the whole point of the assignment, but I think my answer was valid. And I still want to ask the point of death. I think that death disproves the existence of God."

"How could you get to heaven if you don't die?"

"Samantha, if there was no pain and death, this would be heaven. The way I felt in your arms today was heaven. This could be it, so what's the point?"

She nuzzled the back of his neck. "Well at least you've got fifty years of heaven ahead of you, before we get too old to do it."

(CONTINUED)

That broke his melancholy. He brought one of her hands to his lips. "That's looking at the bright side."

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

One fifteen, a.m. They were fifty-eight miles from Evansville. Although the freeway they were walking beside was well traveled, no one would pick them up. Their clean but worn clothes, the odd fact that one was riding the other, and the early hour were all likely factors. "Nobody trusts teenagers anymore." Was Samantha's theory. If they kept this pace, they would reach Evansville about four p.m. But they couldn't keep this pace. Tom would weary, especially carrying his friend. There would have to be breaks for calls of nature and eating. There was no time for sleeping, except for what naps Samantha could catch. Tom would have to stay awake until it was over.

"You could make it if you'd leave me behind." Samantha said suddenly. "I'm really slowing you down."

Tom snorted. "Before, I couldn't beg you to leave my side. When your life was in danger."

"We aren't going to make it with me on your back."

"So I leave you by the side of the road? Unable to walk? Give me a fucking break." He scoffed.

"You have money." She argued. "There are motels on the turnoffs. You can come back for me."

A chill coursed through Tom. "Shut up. I'm not leaving you behind. I'd come back and you'd be gone. I would never find you again. Fuck that."

"What could happen to me?" She laughed gently.

"Nothing, because I'm not leaving you behind."

(CONTINUED)

Honey/Dexter Goad/118.

Samantha tensed her muscles. "What if I jump off you?"

He shrugged. "I'd pick you up."

The simplicity of that response ignited a girlish giggle in Samantha. She loved him so much. "You try to pick me up, I'll slug you."

"No you won't." Stated Tom.

That raised an eyebrow. "Oh yeah?"

"You're too fucked up to hit anybody."

"You stubborn son of a bitch."

Tom walked on.

Samantha didn't leap off.

Around three a.m., fifty miles from Evansville. They took a rest stop, sitting on a hill beside the road. "I'm so fucking tired." Tom wheezed. He closed his eyes. A couple minutes later, an odd noise one of the passing cars made snapped him awake. Samantha was gone.

His heart racing, he scanned both sides of the road frantically. No sign of her. He crested the hill to look behind it. The girl was thirty yards away, crawling towards a thick forest nearby. He caught up with her and strolled beside her. "So ... what was running through your mind?" He asked lightly. "I would wake up, say 'damn, I can't find her!', and keep walking to Evansville? Jesus Christ, I would have torn up those woods until I found you."

"You try to pick me up, you'll regret it!" She warned.

"Why does it seem like we have this conversation every other day?" Asked Tom in a weary voice.

(CONTINUED)

Samantha looked deeply into his eyes, read the relentless determination there and raised her arms in invitation.

He lowered down without comment so she could climb on. "We'll never make it. Your stubborn ass has just guaranteed that." She discouraged as she returned to her usual place on his back.

Tom waited until he had collected his backpack. "Yes, we will."

They stopped to rest again around five a.m. They were forty-six miles from Evansville. "We've only come four miles in two hours?" Samantha gasped, glaring at the mile sign.

"Don't start again." He pleaded.

"No, I'm trying to think of some other solution. We only have fifteen hours at the most. Maybe if you wave our money at the passing cars, one of them would stop."

Tom lightly touched the bruises on her face. "We are both beat up to hell. The only people that would stop would do so to rob us of the money I flashed."

"We have to do something."

"Yeah, we will. We'll walk." He got laboriously to his feet. "That goddamn Parks. I would feel worse about killing him if he hadn't thrown our boat in the drink."

Seven a.m. They were stopping to rest every half hour because Sammy was becoming impossibly heavy. Tom had been carrying her for about ten hours, now. They had traveled thirty one miles. They had forty-four miles to go, and twelve hours to cover it. And their pace was steadily getting worse.

"We have to do something." Tom gasped. They were eating the rest of their food save for one sandwich each.

(CONTINUED)

Honey/Dexter Goad/120.

"And I have an idea. I wish I'd have thought of it before."

Samantha leaned forward, setting down her empty canteen.

"There's a turnoff to a gas station, right? We have been passing them left and right. Let's go down there and talk to some of the drivers. It will be harder for them to turn us down face to face. And we can always try to bribe them if persuasion doesn't work."

"You're a genius, Tom." She kissed him.

"That beats some of the other things you have called me on this trip."

Samantha kissed him again for that.

"Get lost."

"Sorry, I don't pick up hitchhikers."

"Did the last people you hitched a ride with beat you up?"

"Fuck off."

"I don't take drug money."

"Leave me alone, please! I never carry money when I'm driving, so I have nothing to rob!"

Tom left that mouse and carried Samantha to the curb and leaned against the gas station. "Those sorry scared-"

An employee came out, looking gruff and annoyed. But he seemed to feel genuine sympathy when he got a close look at them. "I'm sorry, but my boss sent me out here to run you guys off. We've been getting complaints."

Tom glanced at his watch. Ten 'till eight. They had no more time to waste. "No pr-" He cut himself off when he noticed a hand lettered sign in the gas station window.

(CONTINUED)

Honey/Dexter Goad/121.

'Bike for sale! Used, but good condision. Ask in the garage.'

"Hey, is that bike still here?" He pointed.

The employee shrugged. "I guess so. It's not cheap, that's why no one has bought it."

"What is this word?" Samantha pointed at 'condision'.

He gave her a look that suggested she was illiterate.

"Condition."

She made an O with her mouth and nodded wisely. "Maybe they teach that in the ninth grade."

Tom picked her up. "Wiseass." He whispered, loving her. To the employee, he said. "I'll ask about the bike and be gone, one way or the other."

The man assented, but followed them as they made their way to the garage. A '92 Harley Davidson was parked near the door. Tom groaned, having envisioned a bicycle, which would have been the answer to their dilemma. "Fuck."

A stocky man in clean overalls wondered over protectively, since they were close to the hog. The other employee spoke up. "They want to ask about the bike, Hank."

Tom couldn't ride a motorcycle, although it would have had them in Evansville in no time at all. He started to turn away and offer excuses.

"Forty dollars." Hank said.

The boy was stunned. "Excuse me?"

"That may sound high, but she's in good condition. My son barely rode her. I bought him a moped last week and he don't need a ten speed no more."

(CONTINUED)

Tom was lost, but Sammy less tired because she had been riding and napping, spoke up. "A ten speed? You have a ten speed? That would be delightful!"

Hank was charmed, despite her appearance. He fetched the bicycle from the back of the shop. It was a powder blue Swinn, and looked in good shape. "She's not a girl's bike, but I think she'll like you."

Tom cleared his throat. "We'll take it." He produced four tens.

"You got yourself a ride, young man."

"Be careful." Tom warned his friend as they were about to ride off. "If we lean to one side or the other, let me stick my foot out. If you do it, you will only fuck up your ankles worse. Jesus forbid we wreck. I'm going to go easy. A steady four mile an hour pace is all we need to make it."

"As you wish, Captain Picard."

He began pedaling, the handling, despite the extra weight of the passenger, was good. "You seem to be in a real silly mood."

"I think I'm drunk on pain and exhaustion. I feel silly."

They were on the main road now. It was a little after eight. "That Hank guy," Samantha commented. "Kept acting like this damn bike was alive. 'She' this, 'she' that. It's a 'boy's bike', why can't the fucker be a 'he'?"

"It's a mechanic thing, honey." He answered between gasps.

"One more time." She warned balefully. "Call me 'honey' one more time. Just once, goddamn you."

Tom didn't sound scared. "How can you take that as an insult when I don't mean it as one?"

(CONTINUED)

Honey/Dexter Goad/123.

"But you do mean it as one, buddy. When you say that you are thinking of me as a sweet gooey treat. Like something you put on toast when you have a craving for sugar. I am not 'sweet'! I am not candy, I am not a donut, I am not pastry, I am not a chocolate sundae, I am not a milkshake ... I am not dessert! So why do you call me honey?!"

"I didn't invent the term, Samantha. Millions of men before have used it, and millions of women before you have loved being called that."

Her voice was cutting. "Oh, Jesus Christ. Do you have a mind of your own? Or do you just unconsciously ape everybody else? Are you scared to be different? Or is it just a lack of imagination?"

Tom chuckled. "Okay, I'll tell you what. I'll make up a pet name for you that no woman has ever been called before in the history of sex. How's that?"

"Does it apply to me?"

"I haven't made it up, yet. But I promise that it will apply to you."

She was suspicious. "Okay. Tell me when you have made it up."

"I will."

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

Ten thirty, a.m. Thirty four miles to Evansville. At this pace, they would reach their goal at seven p.m. Sunset had been around seven thirty the last week. They should make it, but Tom was so tired he was about to fall asleep on the bike. His pace was slowing. To keep his alertness, he started talking again.

(CONTINUED)

Honey/Dexter Goad/124.

"Talk to me, Moxie, keep me awake."

"What the fuck did you call me?" A glare was in her voice.

"That's my name for you. Moxie."

She didn't trust him. "What the hell does it mean?"

Tom laughed. Apparently he had reached that level of tiredness where he was legally drunk. "I guess they teach that in the ninth grade."

Samantha was holding on the back of the banana seat she was sharing with him. She brought one of her hands around and squeezed his shoulder. "I didn't deserve that, you fucker."

He was still laughing. "I couldn't resist. I saw the opening and fired."

"It's open season now." She promised.

They stopped to eat their last sandwiches around noon. They were twenty eight miles away. Tom wasn't drowsy anymore, apparently he had hit his second wind. Samantha, however, rested her head on his shoulder while they ate. Her eyelids seemed to keep trying to stay down when she blinked. Everything would be okay as long as they didn't both get tired at the same time.

Tom didn't waste any time after they finished their meal. It was back on the bike and onward. If they kept their present pace they would reach their goal around seven o'clock. But that left no time for sitting around fighting sleep.

Sleep defeated them an hour later. Tom was just passing the sign which informed them that Evansville was twenty-three miles away when Samantha slumped sideways, upsetting their balance. He was too drowsy to react in time, so they spilled onto the packed dirt beside the shoulder on the highway.

(CONTINUED)

Honey/Dexter Goad/125.

His friend cried out in agony as she twisted and then fell onto her right ankle. Tom escaped with a couple mile abrasions.

"I'm fucked up." Cried Samantha when she had the breath to spare. She was pounding the dirt with her good fist and writhing.

Tom cradled her in his arms. "Stop that. Here, squeeze my hand, as hard as you have to."

It took ten minutes for the pain to become manageable. She cried unashamedly while he held her, murmuring nonsense. She dried her eyes on his shirt, which was only marginally less dirty than hers. "Let's go."

"Are you sure?"

"Do we have a choice?" Demanded Samantha.

"You need a doctor. We can't put it off any longer."

She met his eyes bravely. "Do you see a doctor around here? The nearest doctor is Evansville. So why don't we carry our asses there and quit fucking around."

Tom leaned forward and whispered into her ear. "You're my hero."

They rode on, both wide awake again.

Four thirty p.m. Ten miles from Evansville. They had stopped for a break. Tom was examining his friend's right ankle, which didn't seem to be any worse off. She claimed that the pain was no worse now than it had been before. Of course she would claim that a red hot poker shoved up her ass was only mildly uncomfortable.

"It just occurred to me, Tom." Samantha spoke up. "Happy Birthday."

"Thanks, Moxie."

(CONTINUED)

She bit her lip on a cutting reply. Instead, a smile crawled to the forefront. "How does it feel to be sixteen years old?"

"I'll feel better when this is over."

"Come on." She pleaded. "Tell me. How does it feel?"

Tom realized that she was asking something else, in reality. Sixteen was the age recognized by many as that of an adult. Had he crossed an invisible line during the night? Was he now an adult while she was a child? Was that what she was asking? "All that has changed is I am more tired than I was last night."

That seemed to satisfy her. At least, she stopped pestering him.

Five o'clock rolled by, as did the eight mile mark. When they reached the five mile mark at ten till six, they stopped for what would be their last break. Tom rested until six, his friend's head in his lap. When he started to nod off, he shook her and they got moving again.

"An hour to go." He moaned, exhausted. "Tell me a story, Samantha. Get me to Evansville."

"About myself?" She asked self consciously.

Tom nodded. "Yeah. Eventually, I want to know everything about you. Come on, buddy. Talk. Keep me awake. Get me to Evansville."

Samantha wet her lips thoughtfully. "Okay. I've got something. I was ten years old. You may find this hard to believe, but I was kind of hard to handle. My foster parents of the time were fed up with me and the foster mother locked me in the attic. She was having important guests over and I had picked that day to be a total monster. So, up in the attic I went.

(CONTINUED)

Honey/Dexter Goad/127.

I cussed her out until I was sure she was out of earshot, and then started digging through the junk up there. I played with a couple men's suits I found in a foot locker for awhile. I checked out all of the pictures in a cardboard box, but grew bored because I didn't know anybody in them and one of them was dirty. I thought to myself 'fuck this, I'm breaking out of this motherfucker'. I checked the windows, found one that was near a tree, and tried to lift it. I never found out what was wrong with it. Maybe it was jammed, or nailed shut, or even locked. I was too angry by then to care, and didn't bother to inspect it past attempting to lift it. I just dug up a heavy wooden jewelry box and hurled it through the window. The window shattered beautifully. I remember squealing and clapping with delight at the music of my destruction. The box fell two stories straight down. When I heard smashing glass a second time I thought at first it was some kind of weird echo ... until I remembered that this window was right above the driveway. The tree I had been intent on reaching was an old maple tree that extended its ancient limbs over the entire driveway. The second shatter I heard had to be one of the guest's cars. I gingerly peeked out the murdered window. A black Lincoln Continental was directly below me. The driver's side windshield was shattered, but not penetrated. The jewelry box was destroyed, however. It had split open and scattered its contents all over the front yard. As far away as I was, I could still see all the details I needed to. The box had contained dozens of pictures of my foster parents. Dirty pictures. Some recent, some when they were much younger. That explained why the box had been locked.

(CONTINUED)

"All of the important guests ran out to see what the commotion was all about, my foster parents the last to come out. I don't think I have to describe the reactions of the guests. Let's just say that when my foster mother barged into the attic, I was rolling on the floor with laughter. I was laughing so hard I didn't see her come at me with a broom until she hit me in the nose with it. I came up off the floor, snatched it away from her, and chased her around the house with it. My foster father and a male guest finally subdued me, but I think I surprised the guest with my vast and complete knowledge of obscenities. The whole story came out, how I had been locked in the attic, etc. It was an ugly scene. Needless to say, I was sent away from that foster home."

"Have you ever left a foster home peacefully?" Inquired Tom pleasantly.

She smiled sweetly. "Nope."

He reflected for several peddles. "You know what, Samantha? When you tell a story, you don't cuss. You actually sound intelligent and articulate."

"Gee, thanks a fucking lot."

Tom checked his watch, then the mile indicator. "Its six thirty three. We are two miles away. Keep talking honey."

"If I didn't hurt so much-" She began hotly.

"Yeah, I know. Save it. Keep talking, Moxie."

"What does that mean?" Demanded Samantha.

"It means a beautiful, lovely, wonderful, spirited girl."

She squeezed his shoulder again, gently, with her free hand. "You fucking liar. Hey! I can see Evansville! We're going to make it!"

(CONTINUED)

"It's nickname is 'Stoplight City,' given to it by truckers who hate the place."

"Well, it's the promised land as far as I am concerned."

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

They entered Evansville's City limits at 7:03 p.m. on August 12th. Tom stopped just inside the sign, embraced Samantha, and gave her a long, wet, kiss. "Thanks buddy. For bringing me through this last hour ... for everything."

Samantha obviously enjoyed his praise but was equally embarrassed by it. "Its not over yet, mister. Let's go."

It took him a few blocks to get his bearings, but he soon led them straight to the railroad track between Farris avenue and old highway 41. They arrived at the meeting place with plenty of time to spare, maybe a half hour until nightfall.

Tom parked the ten speed, carried his love to the tracks, and sat down next to her. "The woods that were here are gone. But we made it!"

She was subdued. "It's kind of anticlimactic, isn't it"

"What did you expect? Neon lights? A ticker tape parade?"

"I guess after all we have been through, anything would have been a letdown." She didn't add how much of a letdown it would be if Khyla didn't show up.

"You know, to everyone else in the entire world, this stretch of unused railroad tracks means nothing. They pass by it in their cars without a glance. But to us, it is the most beautiful place on Earth. Same piece of ground, different points of view. To you, this place is anticlimactic. To me, it is the Holy Grail."

(CONTINUED)

Tom lay back on the tracks and looked up at the darkening sky. Samantha nestled beside him, sore, ragged, not particularly clean, but lovely. He squeezed her carefully, gazed into her eyes, and waited patiently for whatever would happen next.

He was asleep when the car stopped on the road a dozen feet away, just after nightfall.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

"... and cut!" The director bellowed. "Good. Good. That's it for today, folks."

Khyla sagged and picked up her things. After thirty minutes in makeup, she was ready to go home.

Two men waited at her limo besides the driver, who was standing a respectful distance away from them. The first, a young stocky man in a gray suit, stood in front of the white stretch limo's driver side door. The second, a white haired, casually dressed man sitting on the hood of the limo next to the first man, was swinging his sneakered feet as if waiting for Khyla was the most engaging activity in the world. Neither man was her boyfriend. In fact, neither man even liked her, being the sort of people who despised weakness.

Khyla stopped in front of Mr. Walker, the man in the gray suit. "Have something for me?"

Mr. Walker opened his briefcase. "Yes, we do. Thorn," he indicated his companion, "showed up precisely on time. Tom was there. There was this girl with him. Here are the pictures."

Khyla accepted the envelope and ripped it open eagerly. She pulled out the pictures of the two disheveled teenagers holding each other in a slumbering embrace. "He has a girlfriend!"

(CONTINUED)

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I never expected that! What great news!" Her tone of voice was that of a doctor telling young parents all of their sextuplets had died during the night.

"Indeed." Mr. Walker said sarcastically.

"Did you deliver the package?" She asked mournfully.

"Indeed Thorn did." Mr. Walker replied. "Placed it right in the sleeping boy's hands."

Klyla faced Thorn and said, in a more warm voice, "thank you. He showed up, like I knew he would. He deserves it."

Thorn did not react at all. Instead Mr. Walker said, "you're welcome. Will you be requiring anything else, ma'am?"

She sighed bitterly. "Not unless you have a cure for Aids."

Although this was a revelation to the two men, Mr, Walker only nodded politely and said, "if there is ever anything else we can do for you, please give me a call." With that he turned away and walked towards a black SUV. Thorn hopped off the limo, smiled at Klyla, and followed Mr. Walker.

"Home." She said to her driver as she rushed into the back of the limo. As soon as the door closed she tossed the envelope to the seat next to her and buried her face in her hands.

If the driver could hear her sobs through the raised tinted glass barrier, he gave no indication.

EPILOGUE

"I still don't understand why we're using another fucking boat." Samantha complained. "There is a hundred thousand dollars in this envelope! We could BUY a driver, to say nothing of a car!"

(CONTINUED)

Tom set aside his oar and pulled the only thing besides the certified check for the unimaginable amount of \$100,000 that had been inside the envelope he had been clutching when he woke this morning. It was a single sheet of fancy stationary with drawings of angels in each corner. On it was written:

I hope you use this to live to the fullest. I hope you find true love and love to the fullest. I hope you live a long and happy life.

Live your life, Tom. Forget about me. I am your past. This money represents your future. Take it and live, Tom. Live and love.

Love always,

Klyla

Tom returned the letter to his bag. "The police are looking for us. We can't cash that check." He picked up the oar again. "Besides, I wouldn't get there fast even if I wanted to. Life is about the journey, Sammy. Not the destination."

"Well, our journey is going to be South once we hit the Mississippi. No more Westernly rivers!"

"We'll find a way. Aren't you a believer yet?"

Samantha's scowl faded a little. She wasn't sure she believed they were going just because Tom was worried about Klyla. But she had cast her lot with him and wherever he went, she would follow. Wasn't that how the song went? 'You can go anywhere, as long as I can follow.'

She snorted and said, "oh, don't stop now with the Zen shit. If destinations don't matter, why the fuck are we going somewhere?"

(CONTINUED)

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Tom laughed and thought about his reply. Their heated discussion continued long into the night, echoing over the Ohio river as they journeyed ever Westward. Two teenagers, living and loving, who just happened to be going somewhere in no particular hurry.

THE END