

The Final Flight of the Blue Bee by James Maxey

James Maxey tells us, "The first superhero comic book I ever picked up was Superman #279, all the way back in 1974. The Man of Steel teams up with Batgirl. I don't remember much about the plot, but I do remember thinking that Batgirl was kind of hot. I was hooked. Over three decades, I've accumulated about thirty thousand comic books. No one can say they aren't educational. All the physics and biology details I used to write "Final Flight of the Blue Bee" have been rigorously researched and fact checked against my collection." Anyone wanting to read more of his superhero writing can track down the author's debut novel, Nobody Gets the Girl, which was published last year by Phobos.

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When the old man came out of the bathroom wearing the faded costume, Honey placed her hand over her mouth to stifle a giggle. The black and yellow fabric over his round stomach stretched skin-tight, revealing several inches of white, hairy flesh between his belly button and his metallic gold underwear. The sleeves and leggings of the costume sagged, as if once filled by muscles that had vanished long ago. In the center of his chest was an appliqued bee, the silver foil wings crinkled and ripped. He looked away from her, studying himself in the mirror. She wondered how he saw at all in the black mask that concealed the upper half of his face, the eyes hidden by thick, gold, faceted lenses.

"It's a little early for Halloween, isn't it?" Honey said.

"Yes," he said, frowning.

Recognizing that she'd offended him, Honey assumed her best poker face.

"So," she said. "You're a bee."

"Yes," he said.

"You, uh..." she paused, biting her lip. *He showed you the money*, she thought. *Don't blow this*. "You wanna talk about it?"

"BUZZZZZZZ," he said.

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They'd let Mick Payton out of prison with a new suit and one hundred forty-seven dollars in his pocket. He'd declined the halfway house's offer to send a car to pick him up. He walked out the gate and didn't look back. It was twelve miles to the small town of Starksville. He needed the fresh air, the sunshine. Bees danced in the flowering fields as he walked past.

By that evening he'd blown half the money, starting with a T-bone dinner. The meal cost an outrageous twelve dollars. Back in 1964, you could eat out for a week on twelve dollars. Once he'd finished, he'd walked to a hardware store and spent a breath-taking fifteen dollars on an axe. Finally, the bus ticket to Collinsville, New Jersey, set him back fifty dollars. By now, he was braced for the extra zeroes that followed the prices. He tried to shrug it off. Once he reached Collinsville and the old farm, money wouldn't matter.

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"You haven't heard of the Blue Bee?" the old man asked.

"Blue?" Honey asked, studying his costume, which didn't have a stitch of blue.

"He was my mentor," he said. "I was his partner, Stinger."

"Okay," she said. "Stinger."

"What's your name?" he asked.

"Honey," she said, instantly regretting it. She'd spent the better part of the week practicing the name Xanadu and now she'd blown it.

"That's not your real name," Stinger said.

In a way, it wasn't. It was her childhood nickname, the name her father called her, and the fact that she would now be "performing" under the name bothered her. It also bothered her that the one honest thing about her that had slipped out of her mouth tonight was being treated as a lie.

"I suppose Stinger's on your birth certificate?" she said.

"You don't understand." The old man lowered his head, staring at his shimmering gold booties. "Our secret identities, they were important to our mission. Vital. Without them, our enemies could have ... could have attacked our loved ones. Those of us who had loved ones."

The seriousness of his voice, the sad sincerity--Honey suddenly understood that this wasn't a joke. She raised her hand to cover her mouth, but it was too late. The laughter exploded from her.

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The family farm looked as if it hadn't been visited since 1964. Thickets of brush covered the fields where the cows once grazed. The old barn leaned at a fifteen degree tilt, and most of the roof had fallen in. Out back, the once white hive boxes were black with mildew, half rotted. Only the tiny, three-room farmhouse stood unchanged.

Mick used the axe to break the door open. Inside, the kitchen was exactly as he'd left it when his grandmother died. But one thing was new--the hellish ceaseless vibration that trembled the walls.

He pulled down the door to the attic to discover that the entire space had been filled with a maze of honeycomb. The attic was now a single, giant hive.

"How perfect," Mick said. "Buzz. Buzzzz. Buzzzzzzzzzzz."

In response, a swarm of bees coalesced, forming a living carpet on the stairs. Slowly, gracefully, the locked suitcase appeared at the top of the stairs, gliding down the carpet of bees to come to rest at Mick's feet.

He unlocked the latches with trembling hands, then took a deep breath before opening it.

The trunk was half full of twenty dollar bills. He could buy all the T-bones he wanted now. Sitting neatly atop the money was his spare costume, folded smoothly, the gold and silver gleaming like treasure. And atop this, his back-up Sting-gun, and a dozen vials of pheromone and venom.

He picked up the vials and studied the cloudy fluid, swirling in the dying light.

All the tools he'd need to enforce payment of the old debt.

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Stinger sat on the edge of the bed. He shook his head. "Laughed at by a whore," he said, his shoulders sagging. "This future world is a rough place."

Honey wiped the tears from her face, smudging her fingers with mascara. His use of the word whore

sobered her. So blunt--and so accurate. What did it matter that this was her first time? What did it matter that she'd been in New York for six months without a job and all of her money was gone and she was forty-eight hours away from eviction? Nothing erased the fact that she'd made the decision to rent her body for money. She could have been approached by any number of horrible creeps. This old man was strange, but he didn't seem dangerous. She needed to be more professional.

"About the costume," she said. "I'm cool with it. Whatever floats your boat."

"This isn't some sexual thing," Stinger said. "Back then, there were whispers, of course. You'd have to be blind not to see I was a lot younger than Blue Bee. He was thirty-five, I was twenty, but looked younger. I remember when our archenemy the Hatchet called Blue Bee a pedophile. That really set Blue Bee off. I thought he was going to cripple the Hatchet. He beat him for ten minutes. There wasn't a tooth left in that bastard's mouth afterwards."

"You were, uh, some kind of superhero? A real one?"

"Yes! My God, forty years isn't that long. You remember the Beatles, don't you? You remember Ed Sullivan, and JFK, and Vietnam?"

"I've heard of them, sure."

"But not of Blue Bee and Stinger?"

"Sorry."

Stinger stared into the mirror. Honey got on her knees behind him and rubbed his shoulders.

"We saved the world," he said. "And the world's forgotten."

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They'd reached Mr. Mental before the police. They were always a step ahead of the police.

Mr. Mental stared at the captive Blue Bee, a touch of madness in his eyes, as he announced:

"I control the H-bombs. All of them." He'd tapped his silver helmet. "I have the launch codes in here. I have the detonators primed. A single thought, and I trigger Armageddon."

"You fiend!" Blue Bee said, straining against the bars of the cage that had dropped from the ceiling. Blue Bee looked terrific in his skin-tight navy costume. He had a Charles Atlas build, and when he was angry his eyes took on a fiery, determined cast that made Mick feel that he was in the presence of a true man, a hero.

And that day, climbing through the window behind Mr. Mental, listening to him brag about the bombs, Mick stood in the presence of a true villain. He could have tried something clever. A tap on the shoulder, a quick quip, a punch to the jaw. He could have somersaulted across the room with acrobatic grace and kicked open the bars of Blue Bee's cage. He could have commanded that bees swarm Mr. Mental, and told him to stay still or get the stinging of his life.

But there were all those bombs to think about. Literally, the fate of the world might be decided by what he did next.

So Mick silently placed his Sting-gun about an inch from Mr. Mental's spine, set the dial to ten, and shot him with a needle that pumped in a quart of venom. Mr. Mental slumped to the floor in severe anaphylactic shock. He was dead by the time Mick unlocked Blue Bee's cage.

The police kicked open the door, led by the Commissioner, who hated vigilantes.

"Our work here's done. We'd best buzz off," Blue Bee said, leaping from the window to grab the ladder dangling from the waiting Bee-Wing.

"Yeah, hate to be a drag on your little sting operation," Mick said, perching in the window, glancing back with a white-toothed grin.

The Commissioner shot him in the shoulder. Mick toppled from the window, his hand stretched out, spots dancing before his eyes, when a second bullet caught him in the thigh. Blue Bee reached for him. The tips of his gloved fingers brushed Mick's wrist.

Then Mick fell, nine stories, his life spared by a bounce from the hotel awning, and a crash landing through the roof of the Commissioner's car.

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"So," said Honey. "We gonna do something, or what?"

"Yeah," said Stinger, sagging on the edge of the bed, lost in thought. "Probably."

"You want to ... you want to leave the mask on?"

"Yes," he said.

She brought her lips near his ears and said, the way she'd practiced, "Just tell me what you want, baby."

Stinger chuckled, then sighed. "What I want? Justice."

Honey tensed slightly. "I, um, don't think that's on the menu. How about...?" She leaned in close and whispered a suggestion she didn't quite have the guts to say out loud.

Stinger shook his head. "I don't think so."

"Then how about--"

He cut her short by saying, "The rumors about us, they were right. We were, well, I believe the current popular term is gay. Blue Bee was my lover. My God, he was something. He had a body like a Greek statue."

"Oh," Honey said, pulling back, leaning against the headboard. "Then why am I here?"

"Because I still have needs."

"Okay, baby, okay," she said. Maybe she could still get some money out of him. "Just tell me what you need."

"A hostage," Stinger said.

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Three weeks in the hospital and Robert didn't come to see him once. Not a terrible shock, he supposed. Mick had been unconscious when they pulled off his mask. He was gratified to learn that he was listed on the hospital charts as John Doe. They didn't recognize him. Why should they? He had no life outside of being Stinger, and no relatives now that his grandmother had died. Publishing his photo in the paper didn't turn up any leads. They'd fingerprinted him, but he'd never had any real trouble with the law. If millionaire physician Robert E. Eggers were to suddenly drop in to visit the John Doe handcuffed to the bed, it

wouldn't take a terribly clever person to connect the dots.

The police had quite a case against him. The murder weapon had his prints on it. He'd been caught fleeing the scene of the crime. The final blow--after he'd healed enough to eat solid food again, he'd been taken down to the police station and interrogated under bright lights for five hours. The police hadn't been shy about banging on his casts, or landing punches on areas of his body already bruised and broken. He'd finally admitted to shooting Mr. Mental. The guy's real name turned out to be Mark Carpenski, who'd made his living as a hypnotist on the Jersey Shore before becoming a bank robber.

"He was going to detonate the world's nuclear arsenal with his electro-helmet," Mick protested. "I'm a hero, not a criminal."

The commissioner tossed the helmet onto the table before him.

"This thing ain't nothing but an army helmet wrapped in tin foil, kid," the Commissioner said. "Now, you going to tell us your name, or not? After they scrape your ashes out of the electric chair, wouldn't you like your headstone to say something other than John Doe?"

Despite the beatings, the threats, the tricks, and promises of a bargain, Mick never broke. He never told them his name, or betrayed the Blue Bee. He claimed partial amnesia after his nine-story fall, claimed he couldn't remember who he had been before that final confrontation, and eventually they'd given up. Perhaps they believed him. Certainly, his boyish good looks, his stoic air, and his insistence that he'd done the world a favor by killing Mr. Mental, swayed the jurors. They found him not guilty of first degree murder. But manslaughter, assault with a deadly weapon, breaking and entering, resisting arrest, all brought in guilty verdicts. At twenty, Stinger, a.k.a. John Doe, secretly Mick Payton, found himself in jail for forty years to life.

If he'd ever ratted out the Blue Bee, he could have cut his sentence in half.

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The word didn't quite register with Honey. It seemed to be from some foreign language, nonsense noises strung together.

"Hostage?" she asked.

Stinger turned toward her and held up a Dixie cup full of yellow fluid. She couldn't tell what it was. Then, without warning, he threw it on her.

"What the hell are you doing?" she yelled. She sniffed the drops of the yellow fluid that trembled in the light hairs of her arm. It didn't smell like urine. It smelled nice, actually, like daffodils. Still, that was no excuse.

Outside the hotel window, there was a noise like a train passing. The mirror on the wall began to tremble and dance.

Stinger rose from the bed and pulled open the curtains. It was dark out, even the city lights were blotted, hidden behind a moving curtain of particles that pattered against the window like angry rain. Stinger was humming a constant "zzzzzz" noise through clenched teeth.

Then, with a kung-fu shout, Stinger thrust his hand forward in a sharp punch. The window shattered. Honey shrieked as a cloud of bees swarmed in, engulfing her in a black and gold tornado.

"Don't struggle," Stinger said. "You'll make the bees nervous."

"AAAAAAA!" Honey cried. "Oh God! Oh God! Please! Don't!"

Stinger grabbed her arm and dragged her from the bed. She closed her eyes as bees climbed over her face, their tiny feet tickling her eyelids, their flickering wings teasing her nostrils. She screamed, her mouth wide, and bees crawled on her tongue, and on the inside of her cheeks. Her whole body grew encased by the vibrating, crawling blanket. In utter terror, she fell silent and still, not even breathing. Slowly, the bees crawled out of her mouth.

"Bees are interesting creatures, don't you think?" Stinger's voice sounded far away, nearly lost under the drone of the bees. "Quite orderly--one might even say civilized. They can communicate by dancing. Can you imagine what the world might be like if mankind relied on dance to communicate with one another? It's their beautiful world. It's not our world. They swim in an atmosphere of pheromones. Their music is the rumble of ultrasound. Their skies glimmer in ultraviolet. It's like a parallel universe, in the same space as ours, where flowers have patterns and shapes invisible to us. For a bee, the air is crisscrossed by highways of scent, which stand out as clear and well marked as our modern roads. And your screams--the vibrations are heard by their entire bodies. Have you ever felt the subway rumble underneath your feet without actually being aware of the noise? Bees hear everything this way."

Honey could hold her breath no longer. She sucked in air through clenched teeth. Then, barely parting her lips, she whispered, "Please let me go."

"I'm impressed that you haven't fainted," said Stinger. "Back in 1964, girls were always fainting. You future women are made of stern stuff."

"This is crazy," she sobbed.

"Honey," he said. "I'm dressed up like a damn bee. We can talk crazy if you really want."

"Please, please, please, get them off." She felt like the bees on her eyes were drinking up her tears. By some miracle, it didn't feel like any had stung her. "Please. I'm allergic to bees."

"Ironically," said Stinger, "so was I."

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Mick had been a sickly youth. He was allergic to everything. He'd been beaten up regularly at school, until his grandmother had paid for judo lessons when he was fifteen. Suddenly, his small, almost girlish frame was no longer an invitation for beatings. In the span of a year, he'd gotten his black belt, and placed nine bullies flat on their backs, out cold. Alas, this only resulted in multiple suspensions, and eventually he'd been kicked out of school.

He'd helped his grandmother on the farm. Unfortunately, she'd kept bee hives--they'd been at the farm for half a century, and the honey provided a steady income. But Mick had been hospitalized three times in the last year, and the cost of treating him exceeded the income the honey brought in. One day there was an article in the paper about a physician, Dr. Robert E. Eggers, who had developed a radical new allergy treatment. His grandmother had used the last of her savings to see that Mick became one of Dr. Eggers' patients.

A whirlwind of events--the experimental therapy, a mix of venom and radiation, had nearly killed Mick. In desperation, Robert had taken the comatose teen to the one place on the planet that had the equipment needed to save him--the Bee Hive, the Blue Bee's cavernous secret headquarters.

Mick came out of his coma stronger than ever, his muscles swelling and growing as he followed Robert's training advice and secret pollen-based vitamin therapy. To his amazement, Mick possessed new senses,

could smell things he hadn't smelled before, and see in spectrums of light that had once been hidden. With his newly heightened sense of smell, it didn't take long for him to identify Robert as the Blue Bee. Robert responded by presenting him with a costume and a Stinger-gun on his eighteenth birthday. The amazing team of Blue Bee and Stinger was born.

And in secret, far from the public eye, the private team of Mick and Robert found love.

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As a child, Honey's family had attended a church with a fire-and-brimstone pastor. Week after week, her young mind had been filled with dread of the torments of Hell. She'd endured restless, nightmare-plagued nights for years.

None of her worst nightmares rivaled this.

She was blind. The touch of bees on her eyelids glued her eyes shut with a force her strongest desires for light could never overcome. A mask of bees crawled over her face, sparing only a small circle around her nose. The bees on her clenched lips squelched her yearning need to scream, to shriek, or beg for mercy. The thought of bees swarming into her again left her entire mouth Sahara dry, her tongue glued to the roof of her mouth. She could hear only the drone of a million wings, the sound traveling through her bones, as the bodies of bees burrowed into her ears.

She no longer had any concept of up or down. The bees moved her, supporting her weight, carrying her along a lumpy, lurching carpet. The mass of the bees was unreal, like a thousand heavy woolen quilts piled upon her, entombing her. The heat boiled copious, fevered sweat from her entire body. She could feel--or perhaps imagined feeling--a million tiny tongues licking at her moist skin.

The mass of bees smelled vaguely of clover, yeast, and urine.

Where were they taking her? Time was impossible to gauge. Occasionally, she would hear distant, muffled noises. A gun shot? Stinger shouting? The dinging of elevator bells?

She may as well have been trapped in a barrel of cement for all the sense she could make of what was happening.

At last, after what might have been hours, the bees retreated from her ears. Cool air rushed against them, a whistling of wind.

"He'll love this," Stinger said.

The chill touch of the wind found her lips. The bees there had left.

"Oh, God," Honey said, sucking in air. "Oh God oh God oh God."

"From your profession, I wouldn't have guessed you to be religious," Stinger said.

"Please," she said. "Please don't kill me."

"I can't make any promises," he said.

"Please. Not like this. Not dressed in lingerie, wearing this make-up. Oh God, what will my parents think?"

"One advantage of being an orphan," said Stinger. "I never had any awkward conversations. If I'd had folks, they probably wouldn't have been thrilled by my career choice. I'm sure your folks aren't happy."

"M-my real name isn't Honey," she said. She remembered hearing in movies that it's important for hostages to remind kidnappers that you were a real person. So, as surreal as it seemed to make conversation buried under a mound of bees, she continued: "My real name's Barbara. I'm from Dayton, Ohio. I came here to be an actress and only do this to pay rent. I have a mother, a father, two sisters--they don't know I'm a hooker. I don't want to die and have them find out what I've been up to on the evening news. Please, please, let me go."

"If you could see where you are, you'd be more careful with your words," Stinger said.

"You said you were a hero! A superhero! Why are you doing this? Why?"

"Because heroes work for justice, right? Wrong. The Blue Bee, he had forty years. He could have broken me out of jail at any time. He ignored me. I did forty years hard time before making parole. The Blue Bee, he had money. Impossible, unimaginable wealth. He could have pulled strings. He could have hired attorneys. He was a master of disguise--he had alternate identities set up. He could have helped me, but he didn't."

"I'm sorry," Honey said.

"He's vanished, you know. The Blue Bee hasn't seen action in forty years. I watch the papers."

"He might be dead," Honey said. "How do you know he'll come here? Even if he's alive, he might be in a home by now. He'd be in his seventies."

"He's alive," said Stinger. "His secret identity--the obituary appeared years ago. But it had a code phrase in it, to let me know he'd assumed one of his cover identities. I just don't know which one."

"Where ... where are we? It feels like I've been carried around a lot? It sounds like we're up high some place? Oh God. They're crawling on my eyes. Please, please take them off my face at least. Please."

Stinger sighed. He hummed a little noise, deep in his throat, and the bees crawled away from her face and throat.

She opened her eyes and looked down, to police lights flashing a hundred impossible stories away. She was hanging over open space, supported by a bridge of bees.

The scream long suppressed tore from her lips, echoing in the canyons of the city below.

"We're on top of the Empire State Building, my little Faye Wray," Stinger said. "It's perfect. All the cops in the city are below us. My swarms have emptied the entire building. My bees are instructed to clog the air intakes of helicopters. No one's getting up here without a Bee-Wing."

Honey screamed again, until every last spoonful of air was gone. Then she filled her lungs and screamed some more.

"Yeah," said Stinger. "That's the stuff. I bet they hear that down there. I wonder if they can get a close-up of your face? What they can do with TV cameras these days--amazing. I was a real science fiction fan back in 1964. This world astounds me. My wildest dreams couldn't top it. Look at all those lights."

Honey fought to get control of her panic and her vertigo. Suddenly it wasn't screams coming from her lips, but vomit. She hadn't had any food all day, so only long strings of drooled acid shot from her lips. She spat, trying to clear the bitter taste from her mouth.

She felt completely empty, hollow as a dry gourd. If the bees were to drop her now, she wouldn't mind.

She would float to earth on the winds, weightless as a leaf.

"All screamed out?" Stinger asked. "That's okay. I'm sure they've got plenty of footage by now."

Honey felt light-headed and dreamy. Her situation assumed a certain nightmarish logic. "What if ... what if he doesn't come by morning? Are you going to let me go? You can't wait here forever."

"Honey," he said. "I waited forty years. Blue Bee might be in Hawaii, for all I know. I'm prepared to give him time. We've got a lot of media below. With luck, it won't take too long for him to hear about this."

"Do they even know I'm up here? I was covered by bees."

"Of course. Right now, I've created a ten-foot grid on the street below. It's like a blackboard. My bees land in it and form messages. I've told them I have a hostage. I've told them not to try anything stupid. And I've told them I want the Blue Bee."

"W-won't the bees get tired? What if they drop me? You'll go back to prison."

"I'm never going back inside," said Stinger. "I either escape this cleanly or die a bloody, violent death. Don't worry about the bees getting tired. I coated you with enough pheromone to attract every bee in New York, New Jersey, and Connecticut. Pound for pound, bees are much stronger than people. You've got, oh, maybe three, four tons of bees working to keep you from going plop prematurely."

"Prematurely? You don't need to kill me at all. They know I'm up here. Put me someplace safe now. Please."

"Honey, you just don't get it. There's a rhythm to these things, a ritual. If only you could have seen the Blue Bee at his peak, you'd understand. The way he'd swoop in, graceful and acrobatic, snatching the damsel in distress away from the teeth of danger at the last possible second ... it was impossible not to love him, in those moments. He made me feel like he was something more than human." Stinger closed his eyes and smiled.

"You're putting me in danger so your ex-boyfriend can save me?"

"You ... or me, possibly. If there's anyone in the world who can find a way out of this for me, it's him. My life has become a horrible trap from which I can't see any graceful escape. But the Blue Bee ... he always escaped in the end. He came out on top no matter what. He'd said there was no problem in the world that couldn't be solved by finding the right bad guy to sock in the jaw."

"Don't you see that you're the bad guy? If he's even still alive, if he's not in a wheelchair somewhere, you're the bad guy he's going to sock. Don't you want to be one of the good guys?"

"I've spent forty years in prison," Stinger said, his voice hard and cold. "I was a young man with a pretty face, half-crippled from my injuries. You can't imagine what I endured. I had plenty of time, more than enough time, to stop feeling like a hero, and see myself for what I really am. You learn a lot of things about yourself inside."

"You can't ... you can't let these things haunt you," said Honey.

"That's the damn point of prison, Honey!" Stinger said, waving his Sting-gun for emphasis. "The whole system is designed to haunt you. Some folks, maybe, have it easy. Maybe they're in for a crime they didn't commit. But you know, it's an awful, awful thing to be in for a crime you're guilty of. Because I did kill Mr. Mental. I don't know that I could call him an innocent man, but maybe he was harmless. He was play acting in a game he didn't understand. And so was I. I was a man-boy caught up in a fantasy I

confused with reality, playing dress-up, living like every damn day was Halloween. I had my God-given mission to save this world from crazy guys in funny hats. What a self-righteous prick I was."

Honey blinked away tears. She could tell from the tone of Stinger's voice he would never, ever, let her leave the top of the building alive.

Her tears made the world wavy. All the city lights were surrounded by halos. From the corner of her eye, a shimmering, dark shape raced toward her with breathtaking speed.

Though she'd never seen it before, she knew instantly: It was the Bee-Wing. It was a kind of dark-blue glider with a pair of silver wings buzzing at the rear. A long, silver rope hung from the glider, ending in a bar, from which hung a big, beefy man in a navy-blue suit. He wore a domino mask and a bowler with a golden BB affixed to it. The Bee-Wing flashed by, blowing her hair, and the masked man extended his arm as he sliced through the air toward her. With a horrible, rib-crushing impact, his shoulder caught her in the belly, folding her in two, draping her over him as they hurtled upward.

"Oh no you don't!" Stinger yelled.

As spots danced before her eyes, Honey could barely make out a silver lasso flashing upward, snaring the Blue Bee's ankle. Suddenly, their upward flight jerked to a halt as the Bee-Wing ripped away. They cut a rapid arc through space, back over the observation deck. Blue Bee grabbed her, yanking her to his chest, curling up to shield her as they smacked onto the concrete deck at sixty miles an hour. She was flung away on the impact, skidding across the concrete, crashing into the steel safety bars at the edge. Dazed, she sat up, propping herself against the bars. Long bloody scrapes crisscrossed her legs and arms, as if she'd slid across a cheese grater. Worse, her lingerie was ripped, nearly gone, and dozens of bees covered her belly, struggling for freedom, their stingers impaled in her milky skin.

A dozen feet away, the Blue Bee rolled over to his back. His blue suit was torn, revealing a steel exoskeleton and padding over thin limbs. He coughed, sending a spray of blood into the air. Stinger walked toward him, swapping out his Sting-gun for a gleaming black pistol.

"Mick," the Blue Bee gasped.

"Don't you..." Stinger said, his voice choking. "Don't you dare. You son-of-a-bitch."

"Mick, we--"

"Shut up!" Stinger took aim.

Then, the Bee-Wing, its auto pilot set to return to Blue Bee, swooped in with an angry drone and caught Stinger in the throat, lifting him, throwing him backward, right over the edge of the building. Suddenly the bees went crazy, swarming down in a tornado formation.

With a whirl of gears, the Blue Bee sprang to his feet and rushed toward Honey. From the inner folds of his jacket, he pulled out a glass bottle with a spray top, and began soaking Honey with the blue fluid inside.

"Don't panic, Miss," he said. "I see he's misted you with an attractant. This will negate it. No bee will want to come within ten feet of you with this pheromone."

"I've been stung!" Honey said. "Oh god! I'm allergic! I can feel my throat closing! I'm going to die!"

"Calm down," the Blue Bee said. He set the bottle of repulse-pheromones next to her, then reached into his jacket again, producing a syringe and a flashlight. "I'm a doctor."

He jammed the syringe into her thigh and pushed the plunger. Then he clicked on the flashlight. Instantly, in the middle of the night, Honey developed a sunburn.

"UV radiation activates my special anti-venom," the Blue Bee said, his voice calm and reassuring despite the blood dripping from his mouth. She could see now how thin and frail he truly was. His skin was as wrinkled and thin as crumpled newspaper, stained with brown and blue ink. "This won't merely save you from your present stings. It's a permanent cure. It would have made me a thousand times richer than I already was if the government had ever learned to appreciate the side-effects."

"Can we ... can we talk about this at an emergency room?" she asked. "Not that I don't trust you."

"Let me buzz the Bee-Wing." The Blue Bee rose, walking away a dozen yards, leaning over the rail as he let out a whistle and raised his hand.

He stood there, silently, hand outstretched, for several long seconds. He cleared his throat and said, "It wasn't my fault."

"What?" Honey asked.

"Leaving Stinger in prison. It was ... I mean..." he lowered his hand, wiping the blood from his chin. "I was married, back then. After the Mr. Mental fiasco, my wife ... she had me committed. I had ... I had electroshock therapy. A lot of what went on ... my old life ... it's lost forever."

"I'm sorry," Honey said.

"Robert!"

It was Stinger's shout, barely audible above the horrid, rising whirr of bees. Suddenly, Stinger was lifted above the edge of the deck, standing atop a dense column of gold and black insects.

"You aren't going anywhere, Robert!" Stinger yelled. "Forty years of hate I owe you! Forty years of degradation and abuse and betrayal! Forty years!"

Stinger motioned, waving his hands forward, and twin fists of bees slammed into the Blue Bee's midsection. The old man fell to his knees. In seconds, the swarms coalesced around the old man's head, hiding his face. The bees began to shoot in from the sky like tiny, angry bullets, until his head was encased in a living globe the size of a pumpkin, and the Blue Bee toppled over. His muffled screams could barely be heard over the buzzing.

"I know you're immune to the stings," said Stinger. "So I'm simply going to drown you. I'm going to fill your lungs and throat and mouth and nose. It's going to be slow. It's going to be painful. Just like those forty years."

Honey looked down at the bottle of pheromone, still half full. It must work, since the bees weren't coming anywhere near her. Despite the jagged pain in her ribs, she pulled herself up against the iron rails. She unscrewed the bottle cap as she staggered toward the Blue Bee. But her plan to pour the stuff over him proved unnecessary. As she approached, the bees engulfing him seemed pushed away by an invisible hand. By the time she reached him, his face was hairy with black stingers, but, save for the bees that struggled to escape his lips, the last bees had fled.

"I should have dropped you," Stinger said.

"Yeah," said Honey. "Probably."

She hurled the bottle with a strength that shocked her, striking Stinger dead center of the appliquÃ© bee on his torso.

The bees beneath his feet boiled away. Stinger fell from the sky like a stone. He shouted something, perhaps some curse, or defiant quip, or some urgent final message to the man who'd shaped his life--but the howl of the swarm covered his words.

"Are you all right?" Honey asked, her strength ebbing as she lowered herself beside the Blue Bee.

"Not this time," Blue Bee said, gasping for breath, bees still crawling from his lips. He spat, then spat again, bloody bees flying. "Venom won't get me. But they've stung me from inside, hundreds of times. Lungs feel full of needles. Not the sort of injury this old body's going to shake off. What a way to go."

Honey was dizzy, fighting to stay conscious. She couldn't tell if those last words were a curse, or an exultation.

Darkness ate away the edges of her vision as the doors to the roof opened and the NYPD's finest poured onto the scene.

* * * *

Honey woke in the hospital three days later, feeling stronger than she'd ever felt in her life. Her parents were at her bedside--they told her she'd been in a coma, and that it was a miracle, simply a miracle that she was alive.

Perhaps it was. Something about the events of that night had transformed her. The person she had once been--the lost, desperate girl with no money and no hopes--had passed away. She felt born again. The air felt fresher, the world looked brighter, her arms and legs felt full of iron springs, as if she could leap across rooftops. She could feel the rumble of machinery far away in the hidden depths of the hospital, could hear the electricity humming in the wires of her room. When the nurse brought in flowers, she could smell them in the hall, long before they reached her room, and she knew they were daisies.

Studying the daisies at her bedside, she laughed with delight at all the colors and patterns in the once white petals.