

L' HAVRE, Part 1 by B Nickerson {Rated PG}

Synopsis: *Written in 2001, this tale offers a different twist on Mystique breaking Magneto out of jail. First a wedding, followed by a "haunting"; the break out of Magneto; the rescue of Rogue and one wild night on the town.*

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With Logan gone, Andi now closed the door, leaned against it and sank slowly to the floor. She was exhausted. It'd taken every thing in her to just let Logan walk away and not chase after him like her heart screamed she should. She couldn't--not if she wanted Logan to be fully with her because he wanted to be. She buried her head in her arms on her knees and let the tears she'd been holding back stream down, tears of an aching uncertain heart. She just wasn't sure what Logan was going to choose.

Logan jerked upright in bed covered in sweat. He stared around his room at the mansion in momentary disorientation, his eyes finally stopping on the clock's red digits, informing him it was five a.m., then fell back on the bed to contemplate the dark ceiling an umpteenth time while he debated with himself about what he should do. Sure, he could hit the road again, but at what price? He wasn't likely to come across another woman like Andi anytime soon. She had a magical *something* that drew him like a bee to honey, though he couldn't quite put his finger on what it was. Sighing, he heaved himself up and stretched, making joints pop, then showered and put on fresh clothes. By then, he'd made up his mind. Moving quietly through the sleeping school, he headed downstairs to the garage, put on his helmet, mounted up and road out into the cold morning darkness.

Andi, who'd barely slept herself, jumped at the sudden loud ring of her door bell and sat up abruptly. It rang again--a bit more insistently this time. Throwing her covers aside, she sprang to the floor, snatched up her robe and dashed downstairs, her heart beating wildly that it *could* be Logan. Reaching the door, she could see his tall silhouette through the door glass. Fumbling the door open she stared at him, both surprised and relieved..

He took in the thick plaid robe she wore over gray sweats, but it was her red-rimmed eyes that gave him pause. Obviously she'd been crying and he knew it was his fault, but words stuck in his throat.

"It's pretty early," she commented.

"Yeah." He shifted, struggling against pride, her sweet, intoxicating scent tickling his nostrils, reminding him of what he'd be passing up if he didn't fix things. "I'm sorry," he admitted gruffly.

She walked into his arms and he held her tightly.

"Everythin's gonna be okay, Angel," he murmured. "We can figure it out as we go."

She pulled back, looked at him with a smile, happiness once more in those moss green eyes and he kissed away the wetness from her cheeks until he found her mouth, then kissed her as he should've last night.

Neither of them even noticed or cared that they were still outside on the doorstep.

The next day and the rest of the week, Logan spent working on the third floor with Jack. He found it good therapy for his wedding jitters, though he wouldn't admit to anyone he had them. They'd already stripped all the wallpaper out of all five third floor dormer bedrooms and were presently working on the painting them. Alex, who'd come for Scott and Jean's wedding, was now staying for his and Andi's as well and had offered to help, but Storm kept constantly popping in, interrupting him to show him this or that wallpaper sample or furniture catalog.

After the umpteenth time, Logan finally snapped, "Okay, that's it. You either need to let the kid work or you both need to go away, so we can get some work done around here."

This brought Alex and Storm to a pause in their whispered consultation and Storm glowered indignantly at Logan. Alex put a hand on her elbow. "It's okay," he murmured. "We'll talk later."

"It's not," she hissed back. "Logan has no say over what we do. He's just being a jerk."

Logan had resumed rolling paint up and down the wall, but this, he turned around, pointing the paint roller at

the door. "Out, both of you, now!"

Ro glared at him, but Alex just quietly put down his roller. "Com'on," he said, turned her toward the door.

She resisted for a brief second, a build-up of static charge making everyone's skin crawl before she gave in and strolled out of the room with Alex.

Logan glared after them with a disgusted snort and resumed painting.

Jack regarded him with arched brows.

"What?" Logan demanded. "You got a problem?"

Jack just shrugged and kept rolling. "I didn't say a thing."

On Friday night, the eve of Logan's eminent marriage, Jack drove Logan to Newboro to treat him to a steak dinner, which was all the bachelor party Logan was willing tolerate. He didn't want a big deal made about it and Jack well understood his dislike for crowds.

At the restaurant, Jack sat opposite his pal at the table, just enjoying the steak, beer and conversation and it dawned on him that Logan was about to become his step-Dad--at least, *technically*.

Logan eyed the growing smirk on Jack's face with suspicion. "What's so funny?"

"Nothing," Jack replied, hiding his amusement with a swig of beer. "So, are you nervous?"

"About what?"

"Don't play dumb."

Logan shoved a fork full of steak into his mouth and shook his head. "Nah."

"Liar."

Logan paused cutting his next bite long enough to flip him off.

"Moron," Jack retorted. "I don't know how Mom put's up with you."

"Women love me. It's not my fault."

Jack scrutinized his pal narrowly, remembering the day he'd pinned him to the wrestling mat and assured Logan he'd have his revenge if he so much as betrayed or hurt his Mom one iota. "My Mom *isn't* just any woman," he caution, his tone strongly suggesting his pal had better be watching his p's and q's.

Washing down that last bite, Logan returned his beer bottle to the table, then twisted it back and forth with his eyes on it as he spoke. "I know that. I know she's better then I deserve." Then he met Jack's eyes. "I *will* take good care of her. You don't have to worry."

Jack flashed his cheshire-grin. "That's what I'm counting on," he said, raising his bottle in a salute.

Logan eyed him uncertainly, then chinked his bottle against Jack's and went on enjoying the meal.

The next morning, Logan woke earlier then he did on most Saturdays. Sleep had been more evasive then usual and he decided he needed to be doing something. He just couldn't sit on his hands doing nothing until the time. So, he got up, dressed, grabbed a quick breakfast, then headed back up to the third floor to paint awhile. He worked until mid-morning then showered and put on the same outfit he'd worn for Scott's wedding, which was his black jeans, black leather vest and a white cotton shirt with the sleeves rolled up to his elbows. No string tie this time. It was just a little after eleven when he went down to Xavier's office. That's where he was going to tie the knot with Andi and just thinking about it gave him an unaccustomed flutter of butterflies.

Xavier looked up at his abrupt entry. "Ah, Logan. You remember Reverend Hillard?"

Logan looked at the balding clergy man seated in front of Xavier's desk. He was the same minister who'd married Scott and Jean. He gave him a curt nod.

Hillard stood and, smiling pleasantly, offered him his hand. "Let me be the first to congratulate you. "

Logan politely shook it. "Thanks." Hillard sat again, while Logan glanced impatiently at the clock on the wall. Minutes seemed like hours.

"Would you care to join us?" Xavier suggested, indicating the round-backed chair next to Hillard.

That was last thing Logan wanted. "I'll pass. Thanks."

Xavier nodded and he and Hillard resumed their quiet conversation while Logan strolled to the book shelf along the back wall, letting his eyes roam idly over Xavier's books, selected one, flipped through it as if interested, then put it back. He repeated this with several books, but his thoughts were elsewhere. Making a life commitment to one woman was a big deal. He'd never done it before and it was a little scary to contemplate.

Approaching voices and clicking heels made Logan turn toward the door.

When it opened and he beheld his bride coming in on Jack's arm, all doubts fled away. She was lovely in a white jacket and skirt set with white nyloned legs showing below the skirt and white heels. A loop of pearls hung at her throat and her hair pinned up with sprigs of baby's breath in it. Her face was adorned with a winsome smile, her lips tinted lightly pink and her moss green eyes glowing. In her hands she held a small cluster of white roses.

Logan stepped forward to meet her. He barely noticed Alex and Storm follow them in.

"Are we ready?" Hillard asked, rising and coming to the center of the room.

Logan's left brow quirked upwards inquiringly at Andi and she nodded. "Yeah, we're ready," he replied.

He took his place in front of Hillard, facing him.

"Who gives this woman?" Hillard asked.

"I do," Jack replied, bringing Andi forward. He was wearing black pleated twill trousers and a white polo.

Andi stepped into place beside Logan and Jack, Xavier, Alex and Ro arrayed themselves around them in a semi-circle. Then Hillard opened his book. First he expounded briefly on the virtues and sacredness of marriage, then led Andi and Logan through the traditional litany of vows, finally asking for "presentation of rings."

Logan and Andi now turned to face one another and while Andi was handing her bouquet to Ro, Logan accepted the two rings from Jack. Andi had never seen them. Nervously, he held her smaller one poised at the tip of her finger as he repeated after Hillard, "I give you this ring as a symbol of my love," then slipped the silver-turquoise band up her finger.

Andi looked at it, then at him, her eyes sparkling with pleasure, confirming he'd done well. He passed his to her and she did the same.

"I now pronounce you man and wife," Hillard boomed. "You may kiss the bride."

Logan promptly swept her hard against him, kissing her with unconcealed ardor, ignoring the applause around them. Finally, when he let go, only Hillard, Xavier and Jack were still in the room. Alex and Ro had vanished. He glanced quickly at Andi to see whether she noticed, but only caught the faintest disappointment crossing her face before she put on a confident smile.

A hand gripped his shoulder and he turned. It was Jack.

"Hey, welcome to the family," Jack grinned, offering him a hand to shake. Then in a quiet aside, hissed, "*Dad.*"

Logan gripped his hand and jerked him in close. "Don't ever call me that again," he hissed into his ear, though it was a friendly warning. He was used to his pal's sense of humor.

"Yes, sir," Jack chuckled.

Letting him go, Logan had to suffer Jack embracing him with a bear-hug and when he let go, found Xavier patiently waiting his turn to congratulate him. They shook hands. "I guess I should say thanks," Logan said, "If you hadn't stuck your nose in my business, none of this would've happened."

Xavier chuckled. "You're quite welcome."

It was then Hillard's turn to pump his hand enthusiastically yet again and Logan endured it with a stiff smile, eager to get on with the good part--the honeymoon. Extricating himself from Hillard's grasp, he caught Andi's hand and headed for the door, but his hopes of a quick escape evaporated as they walked out in the wall and found a minor conflagration going on out there. Alex and Ro were seated on the old wood pew and Jack was facing them like a teacher rebuking two bad children.

"What were thinking?" Jack was saying. "The wedding wasn't even half over and you walked out."

Alex, who was now beet-red in the face, stood up and faced his older brother with arms folded on his chest. "I saw as much as I needed to. Want to make something of it?"

"I think I am," Jack responded with equal stubbornness.

Logan felt Andi's hand leave his and watched her insert herself between her two children. "Boys, boys," she intoned, looking between them, rebuking each with a look. Jack walked to a spot several paces down the hall and stood there with his arms crossed on his chest. Andi then threw her arms around her younger son, hugging him.

Just then Logan felt a light touch on his arm and looked down on Ro, who was beside him now, her silver hair arranged in a knot on top of her head. "I just wanted to say congratulations," she said, withdrawing her hand. "I'm sure you and Andi will be quite happy."

"Yeah, thanks."

She smiled demurely, then walked down to where Jack was looking uncharacteristically grumpy. She placed her hand on his arm and Logan pricked up his ears, curious to hear what consolations she intended to offer, but he was interrupted by another touch on the arm. This time it was Andi.

"Are you ready?" she asked with inquiringly arched brows.

He gave Jack and Ro a final glance. Alex had now joined them, but he definitely sensed the mood of things had gone from festive to sour. "Yeah, the sooner we're outta here, the better."

Taking her hand again, they escaped to the garage without further ado, but Logan froze when he saw the Firebird. It had '*Just Married*' scrawled in white all over its glossy black body. He swore. Andi laughed.

Grumbling, he got her in the car, then got in, roared the engine to life and hit the road. He'd made reservations for them at a bed and breakfast in Cape Cod for a week, but he wasn't going there today. He had other plans.

Glancing at his new bride, he observed her somewhat troubled demeanor and reached for her hand. "Hey, you don't look very happy for a bride on her long-awaited honeymoon."

Andi looked at him apologetically. "I'm sorry. I *am* happy."

"There's a *but* in there somewhere."

She sighed. "It just bothers me to see Jack and Alex so at odds with each other over you."

He kissed her hand. "Don't worry, Angel. Alex said he didn't have any problem with me. You just gotta give him room to adjust."

She looked at him with furrowed brow. "When did he say that?"

"Uh, back during Scott's bachelor party. We had a little talk. I didn't tell you?"

She shook her head.

He scowled faintly. "Well, I guess I forgot." Of course, Alex had only declined to *admit* any problems, but he wasn't going to let family drama ruin his honeymoon. "Don't worry, he'll come around on his own," he assured her again.

When they reached the outskirts of Newboro, Logan pulled into a random chain motel, checked in, then drove to their room and parked, old memories of that motel they'd shared in Alberta coming to mind. Fortunately, they'd not be sleeping separately this time. He hopped out and chivalrously opened her car door. "I'll bring up our stuff later," he said, then offered his hand to help her out and guide her to their ground floor room. At the door, he searched for the key card, fumbling from pocket to pocket, having forgotten exactly where he'd put it. Finally he found it.

"So, are you going to carry me over the threshold?" she asked.

He noted the coy, bemused look on her face, then smiled brazenly. "Sure, I can do that," he replied, then, clamping the key-card between his teeth, scooped her up and swung her over his shoulder.

"Logan!" Andi gasped, then giggled. "This is *not* what I had in mind!"

Snatching the key-card from his teeth, he swiped the lock, opened the door, one-handedly slipped the "Do not disturb" tag over the outer knob and back-kicked the door shut all in one smooth motion. Then, still keeping his squealing and giggling bride balanced on his shoulder, emptied his pockets onto the dresser, flipped Andi's shoes off her feet and carried her to the bed. There, he gently lowered her to the bed. Just like in a Japanese tea ceremony, now that all the ritual stuff was over, it was time to savor the long-awaited tea.

It was two days later that Mystique drove away from St John's Bridge, Maryland. She had all her team with her

except Rogue, Buck Thompson and Justin Blake. Rogue, who was neatly tied in a chair in the farmhouse living room like a kidnap victim, sat slumped forward under Hypno's telepathic hypnosis, awaiting the pronunciation of her name that would activate her from her slumber. In the kitchen, Buck and Justin played cards like glassy-eyed automatons, passing time until the next phase of their pre-programmed agenda. Neither older than sixteen, Buck was tall and broad-shouldered with a gift of super-strength, while Justin, was painfully thin with a nervous blinking tic and bad acne. It was his rare gift-combo of telepathy and astral projection, which allowed him to effect the physical world from the astral plane that made him the essential ingredient in Mystique's plan to lure Xavier and his team away from New York. Right now, neither boy thought of anything, but what Hypno had given them to think and Justin Blake was scheduled for a late night astral-journey to Xavier's School for the Gifted.

A light sleeper, Scott abruptly sat up in bed, listening intently and Jean stirred beside him, "What is it?" she asked.

"Shhh," Scott hissed. "I heard something." Then came a distant thud, then a crash and he leapt up. "Someone's downstairs."

Jean hurriedly slipped into her robe and followed him down the hallway, where other bedroom doors opening and sleepy, curious students were starting to pile into the hall.

"What's going on?" Bobby asked.

Scott did a quick visual head-count. No one seemed missing.

Angelica peeked her curly red-head around Jubilee, her eyes wide with fear. "Is it ghosts?"

"No such thing," Scott asserted. It was quiet now. "Stay here," he commanded the students, then signaled Jean to follow him downstairs. They were half way down when Ro's hysterical screams sent them running back up. The kids were huddled together like a herd of frightened deer, staring down the hall toward Ro's room. Bobby and John Proudstar fell in behind them as they dashed past, but just as they reached Ro's door, it flew open and she ran out, practically colliding with them. "What is it?" Scott demanded.

Before she could reply, a potted-plant flew out, forcing them to all duck as it smashed against the wall behind them, then shattered to the floor.

"Something was holding me down," Ro stammered, clutching her flannel nightgown tightly around her, "and was...was....pinching me." She shuddered.

Another plant and a several books flew out the door. Scott swore as he ducked again. "Jean," he ordered, "Try stopping this."

Jean raised her hands and put up a telepathic block so she and Scott could enter Ro's room. He flipped on the light. Suddenly everything was still and no one was there. Back in the hallway, Storm began screaming again.

They dashed out to see her hopping and twisting about, swatting at some invisible tormenter. "Make it stop!" she shrieked.

"Ghosts!," Angelica squealed as she and the other girls dashed screeching back into their room. The door slammed loudly shut behind them.

"Let's try surrounding her," Scott ordered, then he, Jean, Bobby and John Proudstar tried forming a barricade around her, but to no avail.

"It's not working!" Ro yelled as she shoved passed them, frantic to escape the invisible fingers jabbing at her, then she froze, clutching her gown, pale as her white hair, glancing nervously around her. "It just stopped," she announced.

Suddenly the girl's door flung open and a dozen, screaming, panic-filled girl's spilled back into the hallway. "It's in there!" Darla squealed.

"Everyone calm down," Scott commanded. The girls became quiet and huddled together, staring helplessly at the door, listening to the crashes and thuds behind it.

"What is going on?" a firm voice demanded.

They all turned to see Xavier, in his bathrobe in his chair, rolling up behind them. Inside the girl's room it was

suddenly silent, making them all stare at the door, waiting for what might happen next.

"We don't know," Scott replied.

Xavier frowned, then suddenly his wheelchair shot forward down the hallway, spun around and zipped at full speed toward the staircase with Xavier struggling vainly with the control lever.

"Professor!" Scott and Jean cried in unison.

Just short of the stair case, Xavier telekinetically levitated the renegade wheelchair into the air and stayed aloft until the wheels stopped spinning furiously. Then, assured his chair was once more under his own authority, gently lowered it back to the floor and hummed back to his staff and students. He gave the vicinity a once-over with his mind, and finding nothing, surveyed their pale faces looking expectantly at him for answers. "I think," he said, "we should all go downstairs and have some hot chocolate."

Relief passed over everyone like a wave and the students immediately drifted toward the stairs.

"Jean, you and Ro accompany me," Xavier said and they followed him to the elevator while Scott trailed down the stairs after the students.

Xavier waited for Ro to fetch her robe, then used the elevator ride to listen to her account of what happened and pat her hand reassuringly. On the main floor, they went to the dining hall where Scott already had the lights on and students were settling around tables, already speculating on what happened in low murmurs. Jean and Ro recruited several girls to help prepare the hot chocolate, while Xavier hummed to his usual spot at the end of the staff table. Scott and Bobby took chairs on either side of him.

"So what do you think it was?" Scott whispered.

"It was weird, that's what," Bobby answered. Scott threw him an aggrieved get-serious look.

Xavier chuckled. "Let's wait for everyone."

Jean and Ro finally arrived with a tray loaded with mugs of hot cocoa frothy with melting marshmallows. They passed them out, then Jean took a seat beside Scott and Ro sat next to Bobby.

"You know, I can't remember the last time I had hot chocolate." Xavier remarked, then took a careful sip, then looked at them with a thin marshmallow mustache on his lip. Bobby snickered and Xavier smiled at his own bit of frivolity.

"Okay," Scott interjected. "What the heck was going on up there?"

Xavier licked the marshmallow from his lip. "Well, not ghosts. Of that I'm sure."

"Some kind of mutant power, then?" Ro offered.

"Manifestations like that would take an extremely powerful mutant to create," Jean observed.

Xavier tilted his mug, studying the cocoa inside. "Not so much as you might think. I did something quite like it once." He arched a brow. "I was, of course, a much younger man then, inclined to the occasional use of my gifts for mischief." He righted his mug and looked at them, his cheeks reddening. "I was in my last year of med-school and just exploring my abilities to astral project. Having found I could do so rather easily, I began experimenting with my telepathy while in the astral-plane as well and when that proved successful, well...I had a fine romp through the girl's dressing room in the gymnasium."

Bobby fell into a fit of snickers and giggles. Ro pressed her fingers to her lips to keep from doing the same and Scott smiled a controlled smile. Only Jean frowned, her mind preoccupied with the problem. "I thought astral projection was more of a consciously controlled dream experience and manipulating the physical world wasn't possible."

"It's more than that. It involves the unconscious mind leaving the body and traveling among astral plane dimensions like a spaceship among the stars. As for manipulating the physical world, that *is* impossible for an ordinary human, but for an accomplished telepath, well, it *can* be done."

"Then it can't be anyone here," Scott asserted. "Besides you and Jean, no one else comes close to that kind of ability."

"And I've never astral-projected," Jean added.

Xavier nodded. "Yes, it appears we've had a mischievous visitor."

At that moment, a loud clatter came from some place in the mansion and silence fell over the dining room.

"It's back," Bobby concluded.

Xavier glanced over the frightened student faces looking to him for direction and hope. "Keep everyone here," he instructed Scott. "I'll go meet our guest on his own playing field and see what this is about."

He rolled out the door, down the hall and into an empty classroom. There he folded his hands in his lap, focused his mind and relaxed, letting go of the confines of both body and earth. In a moment he was above himself, looking down on his body sagged in the wheelchair below him, as if looking through the distorted bottom of a glass. He looked about him, seeing the astral reproduction of the classroom he'd just left, then floated upwards and leaving that layer, focused on locating his mischief-maker. He spotted him at a distance that became suddenly close, a human-shaped blob of light that was a boy of about fifteen or sixteen, but before he could speak, the boy fled. Setting after him, Xavier followed him past the last dimension of light into the dreaded dark wastes of the in-between where a myriad of fiery eyes came blinking on like dozens of auto tail-lights in the dark. He gazed around, surprised one so young would even dare this evil place. He'd known more than one foolish traveler who'd tarried too long and returned with a red-eyed passenger inside them. He sped on.

Finally, the boy burst from the darkness into an astral layer occupied by a farmhouse. Xavier, able to see through the walls, watched him return to his body, asleep in a bed adjacent to another bed occupied by another young man. In the living room he saw Rogue tied in a chair, whether unconscious or asleep he couldn't tell, and suspected this was all on purpose, though Mystique didn't seem anywhere around. Seeing a clutter of mail on the kitchen table across the room, it suddenly came close and he telepathically sorted through it, seeking an address. Finding one, he memorized it and sped back to his own body in Westchester.

When Xavier opened his eyes, he found Jean crouched on the floor beside his chair, holding his hand, her fine brow wrinkled with consternation. "I was worried," she said.

He smiled and squeezed her hand. "I saw Rogue."

"Where?"

"Tied-up in a farmhouse in Maryland. Come." He spun around and hummed out of the classroom back toward the dining area.

Jean walked beside him. "And Mystique?"

"Nowhere to be seen, but she wanted us to find Rogue. No doubt about that." He whirred back into the dining room, where everyone was exactly as he'd left them minutes ago.

"Well?" Scott asked as he returned to their table. "Did you find our ghost?"

"He saw Rogue," Jean replied eagerly.

"Where?" Bobby demanded. "Is she alright? When are we going after her?"

Xavier held his hand-up and Bobby quieted. "She's in St. John's Bridge, Maryland. Our mischief-maker is one of two young men in the house with her." Bobby looked aghast. "I believe they're meant to guard her," Xavier added assuringly. "I saw Rogue tied in a chair, but she appeared well enough."

"What about Mystique?" Scott asked.

Xavier shook his head.

"After all this time and *now* they lead us to Rogue," Ro said. "It has to be a trap."

"Possibly, but more likely a distraction," Xavier replied.

"From her real target," Scott mused. "What do you think? Magneto? Us?"

"Who cares!" Bobby burst-out, then at everyone's stare, became contrite. He looked at Xavier. "I mean, what about Rogue? We're not just going to leave her there, are we?"

Everyone looked at Xavier again. "No," he replied. "We're not going to leave her there. We take care of our own first." He checked the clock on the fireplace mantle, its hands pointing at one-thirty-five a.m. "Get what sleep you can and we'll meet downstairs at six a.m. for a strategy session. We'll just have to cover our bases the best we can."

Even as the Xavier household was returning to bed, Mystique and her team were slumbering peacefully in a motel outside of Albany, New York. Erik Lehnsherr, known as Magneto, was presently serving his sentence in the West Albany Correctional Facility, the only male maximum security facility in New York state new enough to adequately accommodate his special suspended, plasti-steel cell. Opened in 2010, West Albany was considered a proto-type prison of the future with its high automation and low-guard contingency that included the latest computer surveillance systems, scan devices, motion detectors, auto-riot defenses and auto-guard towers. One technician per eight-hour shift monitored the entire prison population from a central control booth. With its a sparkling, trouble-free record, this jewel in the New York Department of Corrections crown had been selected to house Magneto.

By dawn Mystique and her team were on the road and on their way to Warden Albert Swalley's suburban home to subdue him and his family, so Mystique could assume his identity. She only had four of her mutant team with her: Trane MacCallahan, a strength-mutant, Sophie Loften, a telekinetic, Jeff Montague, a human conductor of electricity who called himself "Lodestarr" and Perry Legrand, called "Shade" because of his chameleon ability to blend into his surroundings when nude. Hypno, had the remaining three 'less vital' teen mutants with him: Cathleen Robinson, a telepath, Mike Avolos, who could phase through solid objects, and Richard Jamerson Castile III, a telekinetic. Shade and Trane were the only ones not hypnotized, since Mystique had found them eager volunteers for the Brotherhood and felt sure Magneto would be pleased with them. Besides, they needed replacements for Toad, who'd died, and Sabretooth, who'd stupidly gotten arrested. Mystique smiled smugly as she imagined what Xavier was doing right now, sure he was putting together a rescue party for Rogue. She knew his protectiveness wouldn't allow him to do less than follow Blake through the astral-plane right to where Rogue was and with St John's Bridge being a good seven hours drive from Westchester, he'd be well kept busy and out of their hair. She chuckled to herself, confident she'd have the better part of the next twenty-four hours to accomplish her task.

She and her team were at Warden Swalley's house and had already subdued the family, when his phone rang unexpectedly and, assuming Swalley's form, she picked it up. "Swalley residence," she answered in his voice.

"Warden, this is Charles Xavier."

She smirked. "Why, yes, what can I do for you?"

"I have reason to believe, Warden, that an attempt to break Magneto out may occur sometime within the next forty-eight hours and I want you to be forewarned."

"Thanks, Professor. Believe me, we'll take every possible precaution." She listened to Xavier's goodbye, then hung up and smiled smugly at the phone a moment before turning to look at the real Warden Swalley, who was tied and gagged along with his family on the floor. She looked at Trane. "Kill them," she ordered, then strode into the garage to take Swalley's car, able to hear the muffled sounds of a silenced nine-millimeter firing four times.

Even as Mystique was on her way to the West Albany prison, Jean and Scott were helping the Professor secure himself in the SUV's back-seat, preparing for the drive to St. Johns, Maryland. He and Jean were leaving first, since it was a seven-hour drive and Jack, Scott and Ro would rendezvous with them later in Airwolf. The plan was to rescue Rogue as a team, then send Airwolf promptly back, so the students would only be on their own a minimum amount of time.

Outside the car, Scott kissed Jean and cupped her cheek in his hand. "Drive careful," he warned. She smiled, then got in and pulled out of the garage into the cold, drizzling rain.

Later that day, at four-thirty, Mystique, still appearing as Warden Swalley and using his pass card, stepped into the control room of the West Albany Correctional Facility. It was a large circular room with a huge control console at its center and curved bullet-proof windows offering a splendid view of Magneto's suspended prison box.

The evening shift-change had just occurred and the new technician spun around, grinning toothily at her entry. "Good evening, Warden."

Mystique studied the barely twenty, freckle-faced youth, thinking, *"You'll never have to worry about growing*

old." She noted his name tag and, flashing Warden Smalley's smile, replied, "Good evening, Mr. Knapp."

"Anything I can do for you, sir?"

"As a matter of fact, yes. I received notification this morning that an attempt on breaking Magneto out may occur."

Knapp burst into laughter and Mystique frowned, making Knapp put on a straight face. "Sorry, sir," he apologized. "I just think that would be...difficult, sir."

Mystique gazed out on Magneto's cell. "Difficult maybe, but not impossible." She looked back at Knapp. "Please test the shield doors, Mr. Knapp."

Knapp spun back to his console and efficiently tapped a button causing solid doors to glide quietly closed over the top of the glass. It was the last thing he ever saw. Quick as a cobra, Mystique stepped forward, jerked his head back, struck his wind-pipe with the edge of her palm, then let him sag gurgling and choking to the floor. Converting from Warden Smalley's form to Knapp's, she shoved his body under the console, took his seat and re-opened the shield doors allowing her to see Magneto stretched out on his bed with a book. She sneered in satisfaction, then scanned the controls and the bank of video displays. From here she'd be able to direct the guards anywhere and busied herself with disabling all the surveillance and external defense systems.

In Westchester, both because of their "haunted" night and the rescue mission, Scott had given the students the day off. In the late afternoon, he called an assembly in Ro's large, conservatory classroom and issued last-minute instructions. "We don't know where Mystique may strike," he told them, "So, after we leave, Bobby, I want you to secure the gates and the building. All of you stay alert and don't hesitate to use your powers to defend yourselves or the school. Any questions?" No one raised their hands. "Okay, dismissed." The students filed out and a short time later, Airwolf swooped lightly out of the hanger with Jack at the helm, Ro riding shotgun and Scott in engineering.

Magneto was quietly reading when he heard the riot alarm sound and didn't even raise a brow. It was a common sound, one he'd heard it many times. According to the guard who delivered his meals, it was usually just gang-members acting out. No big deal. The computer would simply lock-down that wing. What he didn't know was Mystique had just used that alarm to send the majority of guards on a wild goose chase to another wing and had sealed them in behind electronic doors that could only be opened again from the control room. He'd been out of communication with her his entire incarceration, not daring even to think of her or consider the possibility of escape with Xavier visiting him so often. Fortunately, his long association with Charles had well taught him how to discipline his thoughts, leaving him just patiently languishing in this plastic cell. It was cleverly made of an acrylic resin originally developed by NASA for the Mars program and had the tensile strength of steel. It had been unimaginatively branded as "plasti-steel". Everything in it was made of the same material: his exercise bike and weights, his bed, his table and chairs, even his toilet and sink with its shower head attachment behind a poor-excuse-for-privacy wall. Then, as if that weren't enough, they'd installed an extendible walkway to assure his complete isolation and had, aimed at his doorway from a point on the ceiling about fifteen feet away, another NASA designed device, a plasti-steel laser drill, ready to slice him or anyone else in half should the motion sensors just outside his door be triggered. All to keep him hanging like a monkey in a zoo.

Suddenly all the lights went out and scattered emergency lights came on. Puzzled, Magneto laid his book aside and sat up, his senses alert, listening to inmates all around him starting to yell and complain. On impulse he looked toward the laser drill, looking for the tiny red eye that normally indicated it was operational, but didn't see it. His heart pounded in sudden anticipation.

On guard towers and all over the facility, surveillance cameras and computer controlled weapons were off-line. At the front gate, its electronic gates suddenly opened unbidden and the three surprised guards inside the gate shack were frantically trying to call the control room. Teen mutants, Solo and Jeff, as directed by Hypno's pre-programmed orders, walked docilely beside Trane and Shade toward the open gate. Two guards ran from the

guardhouse and, drawing their weapons, took a stand in the open gateway. "Halt!" one shouted.

Solo, Jeff, Trane and Shade all paused, cold rain running down their vortex coats, staring the guards down like the Wyatt's facing the Clancy's at the Okay Corral.

"Do it," Trane growled.

Solo raised her hand and sent the two guards flying backwards to the ground with a telekinetic blast. Then Lodestarr, directing a blue bolt of electricity into each of their chests, electrocuted them where they lay on the wet ground.

Trane now marched his team forward, through the gate and, as they neared the gate-house, the remaining guard ran out to try to stop them, but Jeff just laid him out with another blast of electricity leaving him twitching on the floor. Trane carefully collected the dead guards weapons, then looked warily about for further opposition, but when none arrived, he led his team cautiously inside. The eye-scan post that normally demanded identification, mutely let them pass through the wide open doorway into the inner-scantum of the prison now lit only by emergency lights. They ran into a couple more guards, but Solo easily disarmed them and Jeff shocked them into unconsciousness.

Finally, on the second floor, they met up with Mystique, who was impatiently waiting for them in her natural blue form, flashlight in hand. "Lodestarr and Trane, you come with me," she ordered. "Shade, you and Solo stand guard here." She lead Trane and Lodestarr to where the extendible walkway waited for them, already extended, like a yellow brick road leading to Magneto's cell. She'd been able to do that much from the control room. Signaling for Lodestarr to wait, she led Trane to Magneto's cell. In her beam, she could see Magneto standing, his hands clasped patiently behind him.

"Mystique, my dear," he smiled, "How very glad I am to see you."

She studied his cell door. It was on a separate system from the control room, but with the power-off, it could simply to be forced. She pointed at it. "Open it, Trane," she ordered.

Magneto cautiously stepped back as Trane griped the bars, tensed muscles and, with a grunt, tore it far enough out for Magneto to slip out. "Thank-you, dear boy," he said.

"This is Trane," Mystique introduced. "He has joined us."

Trane only gave Magneto a modest nod. Magneto looked the strapping, red-haired Kansas farm-boy over. "Very good," he said, then offered Mystique his elbow. She slid her slender-blue hand through his arm and they strolled down the walkway with Trane following, pausing when they reached Lodestarr. "This is Lodestarr," she introduced.

Magneto nodded to the young man, who remained impassive, He noted the oddity of his zombie-like state.

"Come, follow," Mystique commanded, and Lodestarr fell behind her beside Trane.

When they met up with Shade and Solo, she also introduced them as well. She indicated the stockier young man with curly, brown hair. "This is Shade and he has also willingly joined us."

Shade grinned and shook Magneto's hand.

Beside him stood a short, buxom girl with black hair and blank-eyes. "And this is Solo," Mystique said. "Come, follow," she commanded the girl and led the way back toward the main entrance.

As they walked, Magneto leaned to her ear. "This Lodestarr and Solo---they seem odd," he whispered curiously.

She smirked. "Let's just say they are in a state of control, thanks to another very useful mutant I've found for us."

"Ah," he replied, patting her hand. "You've been up to your usual efficiency, I see."

She beamed with pleasure. When they reached the outer gate, a sixteen passenger van, driven by Castile, pulled to a fast stop, then Hypno hopped-out and slid the side door open for them. Magneto eyed the balding, red-headed dwarf as he got in and Hypno unflinchingly returned his gaze, then slammed the door shut after them. Hopping back in the front seat again, he ordered Castile to drive and they tore away.

At the same time, Bobby Drake was in the school's rec-room playing foosball with Sam, Angelia and Tel when Elliot suddenly ran in, shouting "Bobby!"

Bobby looked up at him with a start. "What is it, Elliot?"

Elliot screeched to a halt in front of him, jabbing his thick, round glasses back up his nose. "Some of the kids are leaving!" he panted.

Bobby dashed from rec-room down the hallway arriving just in time to see Darla disappear through the doorway into the garage. He tore to the door and threw it open. Pyro, Jubilee, Nick, Kitty, Fred and Darla, were all bundled in coats and jackets like they were going somewhere and they turned and stared at him. "Where the heck on you going?" Bobby demanded.

"Out. What's it the heck look like?" Pyro mimicked.

"You can't leave."

"Why not?" Pyro challenged.

"Because, we're supposed to stay here and protect the school."

Pyro laughed disdainfully. "And what have we got anybody wants?" The girl's twittered and that egged Pyro on.

"It's not right," Bobby stubbornly replied.

"Whatcha gonna do, Mr Summers-Pet? Freeze the doors? How 'bout the car keys?"

Sparks flew from Drake's eyes. "I could."

Bobby suddenly felt someone grip his shoulder and glanced back. It was John Proudstar. Proudstar folded his arms against his broad chest and glared down at them, his very presence taking some of the fight out of Pyro's looks. "Drake's right," he said. "You're not doing right by Professor X." Jubilee, Kitty and Nick traded self-conscious glances. "But if you're gonna go," Proudstar concluded, "it's on your heads."

"No worries, mate," Pyro promised. "Nothin's gonna happen." Then he and his followers trailed away, determined to play hooky, with only Kitty throwing a guilty backward glance at Bobby.

Bobby looked dubiously at Proudstar. "Are you sure we shouldn't stop them. We could, you know."

"I know, but it's like the Professor says, we gotta pick our battles and this one's not worth it." He slapped Bobby on the back, "Com'on. Let it be on them," then sauntered back toward the rec-room. Bobby closed the door and followed reluctantly, still not sure they'd done the right thing or how it would effect Scott's trust in him.

In the garage, Pyro selected the 1976 TransAm T-top, since it was among the very few of Xavier's classics with both an automatic transmission *and* a back seat. Armed with his learner's permit since last summer, and having driven with Summers a few trips, he was itching to hit the road on his own. Nick and the three girls squeezed into the back seat, Fred stuffed himself into the front passenger seat and Pyro zoomed out for a night on the town.

In St. John's Bridge, Jean carefully turned off the SUV's headlights as she neared the farmhouse and parked about a block away from its driveway. It was a gray, two-story structure with a worn, barely standing barn behind it and a stubble-filled cornfield just beyond the yard. Only the first floor windows were lit and they could see a shadow cross once and a while. Jean checked the time on the dash-clock. It was six-ten. "They should be here soon," she said to the Professor in the back seat.

Xavier only replied, "Uh-hum." His eyes were closed and he was trying to read the mind's of the people inside. What he found disturbed him, particularly with Rogue.

Just then, they both heard Scott's voice in their ear-mikes from Airwolf. "We're reading just five heat signatures total. Three inside and you two outside," he reported.

Xavier replied, "The two boys inside are armed and seem to be under some sort of sophisticated mind-control, though I believe I can neutralize them from here."

"Good. You give us the signal and we'll move in."

"Be cautious of Rogue, Scott. I'm not certain exactly what we're dealing with. She doesn't read like the Marie I remember."

"Is it the mind-control?"

"That's part of it, but there's something else..." Xavier shook his head. "I'll need a closer read to know for sure."

"Right. One Rogue coming up," Scott replied. "Let's roll."

Jean quietly pulled forward into the driveway, close to the house, then got out to wait for Scott and Ro. She watched Airwolf's silhouette hover close to the cornfield, then Scott and Ro spill out onto the ground. Ducking the chopper blades, they ran to the wire fence that separated the farm property from the field, which Scott removed efficiently with a narrow laser beam, then dashed to Jean's side. Above them, Jack flew Airwolf into position above the farmhouse, guns out. "Vicinity still clear," he reported.

"Wait a moment," Xavier said, then reached with his mind into the two boys minds, severing Hypno's spell over them and rendered them unconscious. "All right, go" he said.

Scott, Jean and Storm dashed into the house. "You two search the boys for weapons and I'll get Rogue," Scott ordered. He went into the living room where Rogue was tied and slumped forward in an over-stuffed chair that'd seen better days and knelt to loosen her bonds. As soon as he'd untied her, he gripped her shoulders and shook her gently, trying to revive her. "Marie! Wake-up!"

As soon as she heard her name, Rogue's eyes popped open, their blankness startling him, then, before he could utter another word, she seized him by the shoulders, lifted him over her head and flung him across the room as easily as a rag-doll. He crashed against the wall and slid to the floor, stunned, the wind knocked out of him. Unable to even draw in a breath, he watched helplessly as she knelt by him, removed a glove and reached toward his face with her bare hand. He couldn't use his lasers on her, so instead, struggled to scabble away. She grabbed him, though and with a grip like Hercules, held him pinned in place. Then, just as her fingers reached were about to connect with his temple, they stopped. Her face contorted with exertion, as if she were fighting an opposing force, then he heard Jean shouting in his ear-mike, "Professor!!" Suddenly Rogue's eyes rolled back in her head and she flopped forward across him, out cold.

"Scott! Are you all right?" the Professor called in his ear-mike.

"Yes," Scott wheezed weakly, his lungs just starting to work again. Jean and Ro rushed to his side, rolled Rogue off and helped him to his feet. He reached up and felt the knot on the back his head, wincing at he touched it. "She lifted and threw me across the room like it was nothing."

Looking down on Rogue, Ro replied, "We have no idea what's been done to her."

"Bring her here," Xavier ordered.

"Roger," Scott replied and scooped her into his arms with a grunt. "Heavier than she looks," he muttered, then carried her carefully through the house, Ro following to open doors for him.

"What about the rest?" Jean asked the Professor.

"Them, too," he replied.

"Are you sure you want 'em all?" Scott asked through gritted teeth as he worked down the two front steps with Rogue's dead weight.

"We have plenty of room," Xavier answered.

At the SUV, Ro opened the passenger door opposite Xavier and Scott put Rogue in head first, managing to arrange her, with the Professor's help, across the back seat so her head was in Xavier's lap. Holding his gloved hands on either side of her head, Xavier immediately began examining her mind.

Ro slammed the door shut. "What about the other two?" she asked Scott.

"Open the hatch. We'll put both in back." She opened the rear door, while he went back in the house and helped Jean by guide the two unconscious boys as she levitated them into the back of the SUV. As soon as they were in, Ro slammed the hatch shut, then walked back toward the cornfield for her pick-up.

Scott called for Jack. "You read me, Ghost?"

"Roger, Leader," Jack answered.

"Pick up your ride and let's pack it up for home."

"Roger," Jack repeated, "Cancelling combat mode." He tapped a keypad, retracting the Lady's guns, and dropped into the cornfield, allowing Storm to hop in and buckle in. He was at altitude in seconds and hit turbo.

On the ground, Scott was now driving. Jean glanced back at Xavier, his eyes were closed and his brow furrowed in concentration. Scott took one of her hands and squeezed it, drawing her gaze. "Don't worry," he assured her, "Between you and the Professor, she's in good hands."

Back in Middleburg, having eaten their fill of pizza, Pyro was now cruising the streets, heat on full and radio playing so loudly they had to yell to hear each other. No one paid attention to the DJ's weather report which warned of freezing temps and rain turning to sleet by midnight. Fred suddenly pointed at a old, closed restaurant, its parking lot packed with cars and kids standing around smoking and drinking under its eaves, despite the cold drizzle. "Look!" he said. Pyro immediately U-turned and pulled in to join them.

At the school, Jack settled the Lady back in her spot in the hanger near the Blackbird, then he and Storm went directly upstairs to assume command of the home front. Bobby practically ran into them in the hallway, his face tense. "Well? Did you find her?"

"Yes," Storm answered.

"And?" Bobby prompted, wanting more details.

"And she's on the way back with the Professor and Jean."

Bobby looked frustrated, but pressed on to other confessions. "As soon as you guys left, a few of the kids took off for a joyride."

Jack put hands sternly on his hips. "Which kids?"

"Pyro, Fred, Nick, Jubilee, Darla and Kitty."

"Allerdyce, that trouble-maker," Jack spat. "I should have known."

"And you just let them go?" Storm demanded.

"No ma'am," Bobby said, shifting uncomfortably. "I confronted them. Proudstar and I both did, but Pyro was going to turn it into a power-match to make him stay and we decided not to do that---so, we let them go." He looked at the ground, waiting for judgment. He felt a strong hand grip his shoulder and looked up. It was Jack.

"That was a hard call, son, but sounds like you did the right thing."

Bobby heaved a sigh of relief.

"And they haven't come back yet?" Storm asked.

Bobby looked at her intense countenance and flashing eyes and immediately felt less at ease. She was clearly angry. "Yes, ma'am---I mean, no they haven't." He searched Jack's face, trying to read if he, too, was angry. Jack smiled reassuringly. "Don't worry," he said. "Me and Ro will be right here when they do come back and we'll handle them."

"Will you need any help, sir?" Bobby asked, mostly because he still felt bad he hadn't stopped them.

Jack shook his head and Bobby left them behind, his thoughts returning quickly to Rogue. Jack looked down on Ro brooding quietly beside him, arms folded on her chest.

"I can't believe it," she fumed. "The minute our backs were turned, they took off. And Kitty, of all people! I expected better!"

"Kids are kids," Jack philosophized. He thumbed in the direction of the office. "So how about a game of cards while we wait for these knuckle-heads to come back?"

She nodded and they went down to the main office where they could keep an eye on the video feeds.

Inside the SUV, Professor Xavier suddenly opened his eyes and sighed. "It's worse than I thought," he announced. "Mystique forced her to absorb another mutant---to death."

Jean gasped and Scott's grip on the wheel tightened angrily.

Xavier continued, "Rogue's mind is completely mixed up with the another mutants, a girl, I believe, who had a strength-gift."

Reflexively, Scott's hand went to the tender knot on the back of his head. "Well, that explains how she threw

me across the room like a rag-doll, but I thought Rogue could only retain another mutant's powers temporarily?"

"Apparently not once she absorbs past a certain point." Xavier replied grimly.

"Then that girl was in her mind when she died," Jean murmured, remembering her own horrible experience with being in someone's mind when they died. That's how she'd met Professor Xavier and how she so intimately knew the likely mental and emotional trauma Rogue would face. "Is she in mental shock?"

"Not yet. Some sort of mental control was imposed on her too quickly, but once we remove it, that may be a problem. As soon as we get back, I want you to set up that extra room in the lab as an isolation room for her and prepare for the worst."

Jean nodded solemnly, the worst being permanent psychosis and indefinite isolation from the rest of the school population.

Pyro, now on the interstate headed for Newboro, kept his eye on the car's tail lights ahead of them. It was full of new teenage friends they'd just made at the parking lot and they were leading them to a very popular teen dance club known as the "Rumor-Mill". The line there was long, so it took awhile to get in, but once inside they found the place packed with teens and stared around like foreigners. Spectacular neon light designs decorated every wall and the dance floor was throbbing with music, bodies and flashing laser lights.

"Wow," Darla gasped, having never seen such a place.

"Think we can get something to eat and drink?" Fred asked loudly above the music.

Pyro looked around, then spotted one of the soft drink and snack bars well-marked by a neon sign. "Com'on," he said and led in that direction.

"Get me something while I find us a place to sit," Jubilee ordered, then left them to push through the crowd and look for a table. As soon as she saw an empty one, she commandeered it.

When the rest finally arrived, Fred whined, "There's just two chairs!"

Jubilee looked at him like he was an idiot. "Well then, find some. Two of us will stay here and keep these."

Darla, a wispy girl with short, mouse-colored hair and pixie features, hopped into the tall chair beside Jub. Pyro scowled at them both, then, leaving his nachos and soda on the table, grumbled, "Com'on, let's look around," to the others and stalked off. Kitty, Nick and Fred followed, also leaving their food for Jub and Darla to guard.

Unfortunately, Kitty was the only one who returned with a chair. Nick, Fred and Pyro did not. "We couldn't find any," Fred complained as Kitty seated herself.

"We can take turns," Darla brightly suggested. "Some of us can dance while the others sit."

"I'll dance first," Kitty offered and hopped off her newly acquired seat. "Who's coming with me?"

"I will," Pyro volunteered and followed her into the mob on the dance floor. Fred hurriedly jumped in her seat and occupied himself devouring nachos.

Nick, who was sweet on Darla, offered her his hand. "How 'bout you?"

"Watch my seat," she told Jubilee and left, leaving Jubilee alone at the table with Fred. She watched Fred eat nachos until he grinned at her with cheese-covered teeth. She looked away in disgust. Still sour about Trent, she'd promised herself she was done with boys--a promise she broke as soon as her eyes landed on a devilishly handsome blonde guy about twenty-feet away. Even better, he saw her, too, and smiled. Chills prickled her neck and her heart skipped a beat. Suddenly embarrassed to be seen sitting next to Fred, she slid off her chair. "Make sure no one takes these chairs," she ordered, then smiling, shyly approached her new suitor. He stepped away from a table of people he'd been chatting with to meet her.

"Hi," she said.

"Hi," he returned. "I don't remember seeing you here before."

"With so many people, how can you tell?"

He shrugged. "I guess I come here enough, I can tell most of the regulars. My name's Keith. And you are...?"

"Jubilee"

"What an intense name."

"Thanks," she responded, flattered. She gestured at the people he'd just left. "Are these your friends."

"Just some people I know." He jerked his head back toward Fred. "And you?"

She winced as she glanced back at fat Fred Dukes, who appeared to be eating Pyro's nachos. "Uh, yeah, I'm here with friends. Four of them are on the dance floor. We could only find three chairs."

"Maybe we can do something about that," Keith offered and waved for her to follow him. She followed him from table to table, watching him greet various people by name. He seemed to know everyone. In the end, they were able to round up four more chairs and Keith got a couple guys to help carry them to their table. Then, as much as she didn't want to, she introduced Keith to Fred. "Keith," she said, "This is Fred."

Fred wiped his hand on his pants before taking Keith's extended hand.

"Glad to meet you," Keith said. He turned to Jubilee. "Would you like a soda?"

Jubilee indicated her soda on the table and Keith nodded. "Well, let me get one and I'll be right back." He smiled and sauntered away, while Jubilee, completely smitten, looked after him dreamily. She barely noticed Darla, Kitty, Nick and Pyro return.

"Who was that cute guy we saw talking to you?" Darla oozed.

"His name is Keith and he's the reason we all have chairs now."

Kitty, Nick and Pyro gladly slid into their new seats while Jubilee zealously made sure the one on her right stayed empty for Keith.

Pyro stared into his empty nachos tray, then glared at Fred. "You ate my nachos!"

"I was hungry," Fred retorted.

"Why didn't you just go buy more?"

"Cuz I had to stay here and guard the chairs."

Pyro gave him a modest punch in the shoulder for reply.

"Ow. Don't make me mad," Fred whined.

"We're here now. Go get yourself a truckload of nachos," Pyro ordered, "And buy me more."

With a pouting look, Fred slid off his seat and meandered through the crowd to a refreshment counter.

"Aw, you don't have to be so mean," Kitty admonished.

Pyro just scowled at her. Jubilee, seeing Keith returning, brightened and waved him toward the chair beside her, which he slid easily into. "Keith, these are my friends," Jubilee said and, starting on her left, introduced them.

"Darla, Nick, Py..., I mean, John, and Kitty."

Kitty and Darla gawked at Keith. Tall and square-shouldered, he had light blue eyes and a smile that lit up the room.

"So, are you from here?" Darla chattily asked.

Keith nodded. "Are you?"

"We're from Westchester," Jubilee hastily answered, making Keith turn his warm gaze on her again. "It's...uh, our first time here." She dropped her eyes shyly.

"It's a good thing I came tonight then," Keith replied. "I almost didn't" He smiled again and held his hand out to Jubilee. "Care to dance?"

She eagerly accepted and let him guide her to the dance floor. As soon as they were gone, Darla squealed, "Can you believe how cute he is!"

"What a dreamboat," Kitty sighed. "Wish I was Jubilee!"

Darla pretended to swoon. "At least you're sitting next to him."

Nick hunched over his soda. "Aw, he's not so much."

Fred arrived with an armload of snacks and a fresh tray of nachos for Pyro, which he carefully set before him, then hopped back up on his seat.

"You should say thank-you, John," Kitty scolded.

Pyro just gave her an aggrieved glance, then went on eating.

Kitty humphed. "And these boys wonder why we don't want to be *their* girlfriends."

"No class," Darla agreed. Nick reddened, but said nothing.

Jubilee spent her time on the dance floor learning everything she could about Keith. So far she knew his last name was Amberson, he was going to be eighteen next March, he was a senior at Jessica Lynch High School, where his mom taught special-ed and his dad managed a tire place. He had one older sister already in college and he hoped to be a psychologist someday. "You should be a model," she told him during a slow dance.

He laughed gaily. "You think so?"

She blushed and nodded. His face became suddenly serious. "The world's changing so much, so fast people aren't keeping up, but if I'm a psychologist I could help them." He met her eyes. "So many are torn-up inside. They've lost family or been bullied or used by someone or by society in general and now they're filled with hate, distrust and anger."

Jubilee blushed again. It was as if he were looking into her very soul and talking about her.

"I think I could help them rediscover the good in themselves," Keith finished. The slow song ended and keeping her hand, he led her back to their table.

As they neared, Jubilee noticed with alarm that Pyro had drawn a small crowd around him with his showing off. He was doing his usual flame parlor tricks making little points of flame first dance along his finger tips, then disappear, then re-appear from one finger to another. In fact, Jub and Keith couldn't get back to their seats, but were forced to watch from the outer edge of on-lookers. She scowled, then, remembering Keith was beside her also watching, she cautiously glanced at him to see if he was freaked-out or not, but he seemed perfectly calm.

Suddenly, he squeezed her hand, then met her gaze and smiled. Feeling strangely reassured, she smiled and they both looked back at Pyro.

"Show me how to do that," a large boy with a pushy-attitude demanded.

Pyro pocketed his lighter and replied smugly, "A magician never reveals his secrets."

"Aw, com'on," a girl begged.

"Sorry. No can do."

"Someone give me a lighter," the pushy boy ordered. Kids around him searched their pockets. A girl with black eye-liner encircling both eyes offered him hers and he snatched it away. Snapping a flame up, he aimed it at his finger the way he'd seen Pyro do.

Kitty, Darla, Nick, Fred and Jubilee all watched in silent horror.

"I wouldn't do that," Pyro cautioned. "If you don't know the trick, you'll get burned."

The pushy-boy first eyed him, then his audience, sneered and stuck his finger in the flame. He promptly screamed and dropped the lighter. Everyone laughed.

"Told you so," Pyro snapped.

The pushy-kid glared at him, then shoved his way out of the snickering crowd, practically knocking a bystander into Pyro's lap on his way past. The departing ruffian gave him the finger and Pyro returned the favor. "Jerk," he muttered. The little crowd of spectators slowly drifted away, finally allowing Jubilee and Keith to return to their table. She'd just taken a step forward when she realized Keith was hanging back, still looking after the ruffian with narrowed eyes.

"What is it?" she asked.

Keith looked at her. "Nothing." He indicated the table. "Wait here, I'll be right back." Then left. Puzzled, she hopped back in her seat.

Nick was busy rebuking Pyro. "What were you doing? Trying to get us in trouble?"

"I told you it wasn't a smart thing to do," Kitty added.

Pyro just laughed them off. "You're all wussies. What's he gonna do? Call his Momma?" He turned on Jubilee. "Where'd your boyfriend go? Did he runaway?"

Under the table, Jubilee clenched her fists, resisting the urge to give him a dose of fireworks. "Idiot."

"Uh-oh," Fred murmured. He pointed and they all looked. The ruffian that had been laughed away was now headed back toward them and he had four big guys with him.

Continued in L'Havre, Pt 2