

THE RUNAWAYS, Part 1 by B Nickerson {Rated PG}

Synopsis: Trent Boland persuades Jubilee to runaway with him and the team goes after them, which sets the stage for encountering Gambit in New Orleans.

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Early the next morning, Ben Weir sullenly lead Mr. Lei up the front steps of Xavier's School, still mulling over his disillusionment. Hezekiah Lei was one of Them, the unseen masters of others destinies whose ranks he'd even hoped to join, but now knew wasn't even remotely near the truth. Lei had, upon first arriving, immediately gone over his entire operation and personnel files for security reasons and it was during the ensuing conversation he found out Lei had no grand or glorious scheme. He was, in fact, just playing things by ear and had only the vaguest idea of what he wanted to do with this "the spider" even if he caught him. According to Lei, their entire race consisted of nothing more than a bunch of far-flung individuals doing whatever they pleased without any kind of law and order of their own. So, technically, Lei had neither power nor legal grounds to do anything to the Spider. However, he and two allies hoped to force "a climate of judicial necessity," by capturing the Spider and thus creating a need for their own punitive system of laws like buying a wagon to prove you need a horse. The only reason he was still in this was Lei promised him a prominent place as their legal-eagle. So, here he was, conducting Mr Lei to Xavier's meeting and dreading seeing Andi with Logan more and more with every step.

Even as Weir was trudging into the school, Scott and Andi were upstairs, poised mischievously on either side of Logan's door. Scott pounded it loudly. "Logan!," he called, "Get your lazy butt out of bed!" Then quickly stepped aside, allowing Andi to take his place, so Logan would be confronting her when he opened the door--but nothing happened. Scott gave the door a couple more good pounds with his fist, then flattened against the wall again, covering his mouth to muffle his snickers.

Andi heard the soft thuds of footsteps, then the door flew open, revealing an irate Logan clad only in blue plaid flannel shorts. "What!" he snarled, expecting Scott, but finding Andi instead.

She just smiled sweetly. "Meeting this morning? Remember?"

His face softened. "Yeah," he snorted. "Let me get my clothes." He glanced at Scott, smiling broadly against the wall and just threw him an aggrieved look as he shut the door. They could hear him grumbling from within.

"You're a brave woman," Scott chuckled.

Andi winked and he left her to see if Jean was ready while she waited for Logan. She watched students milling in and out of rooms getting ready for breakfast until he popped out a few minutes later, dressed and neatly brushed. He grabbed her hand and headed them briskly downstairs.

"The Professor has coffee and rolls for us," Andi told him.

"Good," he grumbled. When they reached the ground floor, Logan glanced around the quiet hallway, then abruptly pulled her into the nearest empty room. "One thing first," he murmured, drawing her close, smiling with mischief glittering in his hazel eyes as Andi welcomed his warm "good morning" kiss.

When they arrived in Xavier's office a few minutes later, they found the rest of the staff already there, milling around the table of rolls, coffee and tea. Andi's eyes, however, fell immediately on Mr. Lei, seated beside the Professor's desk and, slipping her hand out of Logan's grasp, went to him..

"Master Lei?" she murmured, stunned to see him.

He stood. "My child," he smiled, holding his hands out to her. Andi seized them fearfully, afraid to hear what he might tell her, her eyes searching his face anxiously. Without a word, he lay a hand gently against her temple, linking their thoughts and conveying to her in a split-second everything he'd already told the Professor, then mentally asked her permission to reveal the contents of the letter she'd brought him.. Andi just nodded numbly, still reeling from his news, fully understanding 'the Spider', his messiah-agenda and his massive network were a major league issue far worse than Magneto ever could be.

It meant they would be really playing hard-ball now.

Logan, having forgotten all about the coffee, was still just standing where Andi had left him, transfixed watching her with Lei, then, as soon as Lei dropped his hand from her face, Andi turned and waved for him to come over. He approached them, suspiciously scrutinizing the silver-haired Chinese man.

"Master Lei, this is Logan," Andi said. "And Logan, this is Master Lei."

Lei smiled and bowed, then offered Logan his hand. Logan stared at it hesitantly, then, out of respect for Andi, grasped it only to discover Lei didn't immediately let go. Annoyed, Logan controlled an impulse to slug him and just waited impatiently as Lei held out his other hand for Andi's, layered their hands together between his own, bowed over them, then, without a word, let go and resumed his chair.

Logan threw Andi a questioning look as they made their way to the coffee service afterwards. "What was that?" he grumbled, loading a paper dessert plate with donuts.

Before she could answer, Scott was suddenly on her other side demanding the same thing. "What was that all about?" he hissed.

"That's what I asked," Logan retorted.

Andi looked between them, a little unsure herself. She passed Logan a mug of black coffee. "I think," she cautiously replied, "it was some kind of blessing."

"For what?" he asked.

Andi shrugged a shoulder as she poured cream and sugar into her own. "On us--as a couple, I suppose."

Scott smirked at that and, walking behind Andi and Logan, whispered aside to him, "And *you* could use all the blessing you can get."

Since his hands were full, Logan had to settle for growling a warning. "Watch it, bub."

Xavier cleared his throat. "Let us begin."

Everyone drifted to their seats. That's when Logan finally noticed Weir, seated against the back wall by the door, his dark silk suit making him blend into the shadows. Surprised he didn't smell him, he could only suppose he'd not worn that stinking cologne and for Weir's benefit, Logan made a big production of throwing his arm around Andi's shoulders as they settled side by side on the sofa just in front of him. Weir noticed, but being used to keeping a poker face in a courtroom, he just phlegmatically crossed his legs and studied the large portrait of a guardian angel rescuing a child that seemed the focal point of Xavier's office decor.

"This is Andi's friend, Mr. Lei," Xavier explained simply. "He's come here to brief us on something you all need to hear."

Lei stood then and began his explanation. He reiterated the facts about the suspicious letter Andi had received, her request for his help and how that led him to discover a powerful non-mutant was manipulating things, including them, to accomplish his goals. He explained the suspected depth and breadth of the Spider's network of agents, his cult connection and their agenda for finding a mutant-messiah. That caused several gasps and whispers and made Logan just roll his eyes heavenward. Lei paused, allowing them time to quiet down again before going on. "The problem is, because the Spider does keep himself so far removed from any direct connection with his agents, I haven't had any luck finding him."

"So you have no idea who he is?" Jean repeated.

Lei shook his head. "No, I don't know who he is or even where he is, but I will continue looking and anything I learn, I will pass on to you."

"I don't understand how you'll find this messiah," Storm questioned softly. "How will you be able to tell?"

"He's devised a blood test that tells him what he wants to know," Lei responded.

Storm's brow furrowed thoughtfully, but Logan guffawed, "That's the stupidest thing I've ever heard!"

"I saw evidence of just such a test on the two mutants recruited for the matches with Andi," Lei replied.

Andi remembered the damage she'd done. "Whatever became of them?" she asked.

"The Spider's agent, who hired them, abandoned them like dogs to the streets, penniless and injured. That's where I found them." Appalled murmurs went around the room and Andi blanched. Lei raised his hand for silence. "You can rest assured they were cared for."

"And what's he gonna do with this so-called messiah even if finds one?" Logan challenged. "What difference is that to us? Why can't we just live and let live?"

Lei consulted Xavier with a look and Xavier nodded. "That's a good question, Logan. The tricky part is Mr. Lei and I have reason to believe he's already put things in motion to make us part of that plan."

Scott frowned. "How'd that get by us?"

"The indicators were subtle," Xavier hedged, unwilling to reveal Andi, Jack and Airwolf were probably still the Spider's intended puppets. Worry would only be counter-productive. "Without Mr. Lei's help, I doubt very much I would have ever recognized them, which is why we've agreed to pool our resources and work together on this matter. Regardless of how bizarre his agenda sounds to us, we're facing a formidable and elusive opponent who is, I think, too large for us to handle on our own."

"Bring 'em on," Scott asserted, glancing toward Jack for approval, but Jack didn't respond. He was too busy thinking. Not so much about the question of whether his Dad had been murdered, though that was disturbing, but about what this spider-guy intended to do with him, his Mom and Airwolf. They'd both always suspected something was up, especially after Weir started setting up those peculiar training fights with mysterious observers, but never knew exactly what. Weir knew nothing. He was just a hired gun carrying out orders and if Jack could blame him for anything, it'd be for not asking enough questions and Xavier had obviously just been a tool for putting the old bird back into fighting form. But for what? Whatever it was, he doubted he was gonna like it and if he wasn't going to like it, then they were going to have to do something to prevent it. He glanced toward his mother sitting pale and quiet beside Logan, wondering if she might be thinking the same thing and, when he caught her eye, he knew she was.

Lei added, "And Mr. Weir will continue to serve as intermediary and remain at your disposal."

All eyes turned to the back of the room and Weir just smiled coolly.

Jack humphed. "You're leaving us the same joker who set up all those weird fights?"

"Mr. Weir wasn't working for me at the time," Lei replied. "He was given misleading information in order to obtain his services, but now, he works for me and *only* me, I assure you."

Logan leered over his shoulder at Weir. Andi immediately tapped his knee, gently signaling him to behave, but he silenced her tapping fingers with his hand and just mouthed a silent, "Sucker" to Weir. Weir just remained impassive, his hands neatly clasped in his lap, though he secretly longed to tell Logan where to go and just what to do with himself once he got there.

"Are you guaranteeing that?" Jack challenged.

"Yes," Lei responded. "All necessary protocols are already in place." He surveyed his audience for more comments, but no one spoke. He looked to the Professor, who glanced at the wall clock. It was about ten to eight.

"Well, if there aren't any more questions," Xavier said, "then we should break for class."

Everyone rose and filed out of his office. In the hallway, Logan announced his opinion. "That's B.S. if I ever heard it," he asserted. "Xavier's holding back."

Scott glanced at Jean and Storm, both looking at him for his reply. Unwilling to discredit his mentor, Scott said, "If he is, he has a good reason." Logan looked critical, then, since Jack and Andi were clearly waiting for him, shrugged and sauntered off.

In Xavier's office, Weir had left his seat to come to Lei's side as Xavier hummed from behind his desk. "Would you mind if I stayed awhile, Professor?" Lei asked. "I would like to enjoy your gardens and perhaps visit with your students over lunch."

Xavier quickly consulted Andi mentally, asking if she thought that would be safe. She assured him it would. "That would be fine," he replied to Lei. "See you at lunch. If you have any questions, I'm sure Mr. Weir can help you. He seems to know his way around quite well," then left, smiling smugly.

Inwardly, Weir winced at that snide barb, but to Lei just said, "I have some errands to run. May I leave you to entertain yourself, sir?"

He nodded. "I will be ready to go after lunch."

"I'll be here at one o'clock," Weir promised, then promptly left, eager to escape the premises. He'd had more than enough salt poured on his wounds for one day.

That evening, the team gathered in the map-room to discuss Lei's revelations about the Spider, but they could only agree they should wait for more intelligence. Jack just listened quietly, having already arranged a date for brunch with Andi on Sunday to discuss the problem in more depth just between themselves. He was sorry it couldn't be sooner, but Sundays were really the only days he could still get his Mom to himself without Logan. The rest of the week was business as usual. He and Logan were still finishing the rappelling tower and Andi, ever since she'd realized Logan might be a cybernetic experiment, had switched to compiling a list of national and international pharmaceutical or medical research companies that might be large enough to have their fingers in that type of thing.

Scott continued to keep a wary eye on Trent and Xavier monitored Mystique's GPS-chip, which showed her to be still in DC. Xavier also happened to catch a brief news blurb about Sabretooth having been arrested in Canada. Currently awaiting trial, the focus of the news-bit was actually the novelty of the Canadian authorities using a stun-belt to control the violent mutant. The report also explored the potential of developing similar stun-collar devices for criminal mutants, which made Xavier shake his head glumly. It wasn't a good precedent, particularly in a country that had, until now, been among the more liberal toward its mutant citizens.

Two days later, Rogue, in the library-computer lab, glanced stealthily at John Proudstar, who was quietly reading at his post by the sign-in table by the door, then back to her screen. This library-lab, though still lined with shelves of books, had also been converted into a PC center. Three long tables arranged in the center of the room each held four old-fashioned monitor-type PC's. They were education-registered PC's, limited strictly to web-based research and useless for anything interactional, like blogs, e-mail or chat. She'd deliberately chosen the table with only two PC's in order to lessen the chance anyone might sit next to her and see what she was doing. Not that she didn't appreciate all Professor Xavier's kindness, but, to her disappointment, kindness was all he was really offering and right now, with all the wedding plans blossoming around her, she was only reminded of everything she couldn't have, things unavailable to girl who sucked the life out of anyone she touched. Xavier wanted her to adjust, but she wanted to be fixed. So, here she was looking for that notice she'd seen once. Rogue gave the clock a nervous glance. Only fifteen minutes of lab time left. "Where are you?" she whispered. She'd stumbled across it a couple weeks back, something posted by a certain doctor who was researching mutant "syndromes" and was seeking mutant volunteers. She remembered it promised anonymity and had some contact information, but couldn't for the life of her remember how'd she come across it. She heard the two remaining students packing up to leave. Biting her lip in concentration, she clicked through search lists as rapidly as she could. Another ten minutes passed.

"Aren't you about done?" John griped, anxious to leave.

"Jus' one mo' second," Rogue promised. Suddenly, she hit on the right path and found it. She hit print, grabbed the print-out, shut down the computer, then collected her stuff and hurried past John irritably waiting to shut off the lights and lock up.

On Sunday, Jack pushed his breakfast plate away. Normally, he ate it clean, but this particular morning worries about Airwolf dulled his appetite. He politely waited until the waitress refreshed their coffees and took their plates away before meeting his mother's eyes squarely. "You know this spider-guy wants us and Airwolf for something. He's used Xavier to fix her up for a reason."

"That's what it looks like," Andi agreed.

"What are we going to do about it?"

"We're going to wait until we reach that bridge to cross it."

Jack snorted. "I think we need to take steps now. I'd rather hide her back in her lair in California, then let him use her for who knows what."

"Jack, look at how he's played us so far! He'd just find a way to force us to play his game, his way."

Jack scowled over his mug. "So, you don't think we can fight him?"

"I don't think we can *hide*. I didn't say we couldn't fight."

He gauged her with narrowed eyes. "You have an idea?"

Andi leaned closer and lowered her voice. "Maybe. I don't know exactly how he found out we had Airwolf. Maybe he got lucky with a few old scraps of intelligence and some good deduction, but between Moffit and Arch Angel almost nothing about her specs was left behind, so I can't believe our spider-friend actually knows what she's capable of and that, my dear, could be our ace-in-the-hole."

Jack sat back, a smug grin spreading across his face. "Sweet. We could use her against him."

"Possibly---if we play our cards right."

Jack nodded and sipped his hot coffee, satisfied the Wolf might bite the Spider after-all.

"For now, this needs to stay between us," his mother warned.

Jack regarded her solemn expression, intuitively knowing she wanted to tell Logan her own way, in her own time. "No problem," he said.

The weeks passed quickly. Trent Boland was on the endurance course with Jack promptly every morning, only socialized with Jubilee in public, performed his assigned duties faithfully and in all ways was the model of rehabilitated behavior, though he was really just waiting for a convenient opportunity for him and Jubilee to escape. Secretly, he loathed Xavier's place and would happily risk the Navy finding him for a little freedom. Getting Jubilee just an added plus. She wanted to go and that was okay by him. So, he was biding his time and paying attention to the activities and conversation of the staff until he saw some signs that an opportunity was ripening. First, Jack informed him he was going out of town for a week and that Mr. Summers would be subbing-in for him on the endurance course. Second, he over-heard Scott mention something about a "mission tomorrow night," with Logan and Andi, which meant only Professor Xavier and Miss Munroe would be home for a few hours. So, as soon as he could, Trent slipped a note to Jubilee with his plan.

At ten next night, Andi and Logan reported to the hangar to prep Airwolf. They would be surveying a small nest of mutants in northern Minnesota, which Xavier, with Cerebro, had located and their mission was to determine whether they were simply a commune or an organized threat. Andi was flying this time, Scott was engineering and Logan, at Andi's invitation, was just going along for the ride.

Upstairs, Scott performed his usual bed-check on Trent before joining them. Feigning sleep, Trent lay still until he heard the door click shut again, then got up and sat in the chair in the dark, watching the clock as he waited for the faint, but distinct tremor the hangar doors made as they rolled open. It was almost a quarter till midnight before he felt it, then Airwolf slipped out like a ghost into the night.

On board, Logan was in the co-pilot seat, peering curiously at the profusion of lights and indicators on the smooth black control panel. He couldn't remember having ever been in a helicopter before and this was his first time up in the Lady. Fuel was far too precious a commodity to waste on joy-riding.

"Silent off," he overheard Andi order Scott.

"Roger" Scott echoed.

"Contacts?"

"Negative."

Logan glanced over his shoulder at Scott, his glasses intent on his monitor, his face reflecting its greenish cast. Turning back, Logan watched the lights of cities and towns below rapidly receding until they were swallowed up by clouds. Seconds later they were even above those and the stars and moon shone clear and bright.

"Stand-by for turbo," Andi ordered. Then they shot forward.

"Whoa!" Logan murmured, impressed. "How fast are we going?"

"About mach one-point-five," Scott answered.

"In English?"

"Almost a thousand miles an hour," Andi replied.

"Whoa." Logan repeated, smiling. No wonder Jack liked it so much.

Back at the estate, Trent collected his jacket, then tip-toed downstairs to the rec room where he found Jubilee nervously waiting for him. "Have you got it?" he whispered.

She pulled a wad of crumpled bills from her jean pocket and showed it to him. It was all the allowance she'd managed not to spend.

"How much?"

"Twenty dollars."

Scowling, he mentally added that to his own twenty-five, then nodded. "It'll have to do. Let's go."

She led the way to the office and deactivated the alarm system, though she felt a twinge of guilt. Every student, once they proved themselves responsible, was told the code, since, according to Xavier, this was their home and not a prison. She knew she was violating that trust. As soon as she'd deactivated it, Trent grabbed her hand and took her out a side-door and across the lawn to the front of the brick perimeter wall by the still closed iron gate. There, he removed the ladder he'd stashed behind the shrubs earlier that day and leaned it against the wall, glad he'd never have see Lawrence again or listen to his endless litany about how great Xavier was. Fortunately, Lawrence wasn't a sharp dude, considering he was a little behind the eight-ball mentally, which is how he'd gotten away with the ladder to begin with. They clambered over the wall, then walked along the road east toward the interstate. It wasn't a busy road, so Trent didn't expect a ride until they reached the highway.

Jubilee had to trot to keep up with his hurried stride. "The Professor will find us," she panted.

"No he won't---not if we can get a ride and keep moving," he promised.

In Minnesota, after surveying the mutant location with Airwolf's sensitive eyes and ears, Andi and Scott both concluded it just a small, unarmed commune and she headed home, cruising high above Chicago's air-traffic hub at turbo, then as soon as they were past it, cutting back to standard speed. "Would you put her on auto-pilot for about thirty minutes, please Scott," she asked.

"Roger."

"You can do that?" Logan asked.

She bobbed her helmet in a nod. "Technically, she can be flown entirely from Scott's seat, but only at standard speed. It takes a pilot for turbo." She let go of the stick as she felt Airwolf assume control, pulled her feet off the pedals and stretched, then held her hand out for Logan to take.

He gently grasped it. "So, does Jack use it much?"

"Not usually. He prefers to fly her himself, though I'm sure he would on an overseas flight."

"Speaking of Jack," Scott interjected, "who's this friend he's gone to visit in New Hampshire?"

"A pilot buddy of his," Andi replied.

"Not just any pilot-buddy," Logan scoffed. "A buddy named *Maureen*."

"Ah, do I smell romance in the air?" Scott replied.

"Are you kidding?" Logan snorted. "That boy's too in love with this bird."

Andi laughed. "Logan's right. Besides, Mo's a career Navy pilot and he'd have to give up Airwolf to be with her and that's not very likely."

Scott humphed. "Well, *his* ideas and *hers* might be different."

Andi just laughed again. She knew where Jack stood on relationships. He knew he was probably looking at hundreds of years still ahead of him and that would mean most women with normal lifespans would age and die long before him. That made him hesitate being steady with any girl, but he was also content remaining a carefree bachelor because their extreme lifespans came with an equally high tolerance for celibacy, though he didn't entirely believe Andi about that at first. He didn't believe until after he'd spent most of his first year of active duty womanizing with his buddies. Then, one day, just woke-up to the truth he wasn't really like his pals. He quit womanizing after that and had, ever since, kept his relationships with girls strictly on a casual, friendly basis.

After thirty minutes, the auto-pilot clicked-off and Andi took control again to fly the remaining distance home. As soon as landed and secured Airwolf, Scott went directly upstairs, thinking only of a warm bed with Jean, while Logan lingered over goodbyes with Andi before finally sending her home, then went to bed himself. No one even gave Trent a thought.

On the interstate, Trent and Jubilee walked up to the small truck stop south of Westchester. He wanted to get away as far and as fast as he could and had going south in mind. He quickly found a trucker headed for Nashville willing to take them, so they hopped in the warm cab and hit the road.

In the morning, Scott turned off his alarm with a groan. It felt like he'd only been asleep five minutes. Reluctantly, he swung his feet to the floor and pulled on his sweats, begrudging Trent for being so much trouble. He grabbed a yogurt from the kitchen on the way out and was on the endurance course by seven sharp, waiting for Trent, but Trent never came. After ten minutes, Scott stalked angrily back into the school, swearing under his breath, charged up the stairs and flung open Trent Boland's bedroom door, only to find it empty. Turning on his heel back into the hallway, he went into each of the boys rooms inquiring if they'd seen Trent. No one had. Frustrated, he was standing in the hallway rubbing the back of his neck, pondering what to do next, when Kitty came up to him. "Mr. Summers, are you looking for Trent?"

He nodded. "Have you seen him?"

"No, but Jub's bed was empty when we got up this morning and we haven't seen her."

"Good God!" Scott exclaimed and immediately dashed downstairs directly to Professor Xavier's wing. "Professor!" he called breathlessly.

Xavier hummed into his sitting-room and frowned at Scott's worried look. "What is it?"

"I think Trent and Jubilee are gone."

He immediately searched the campus with his mind, but didn't find them. "You're right." He looked at the time. "They have a good head start, too." Perturbed, he shook his head, berating himself. "I should of known he was being too cooperative. I should have suspected." He turned his chair toward the main hall.

"Cerebro?" Scott asked.

Xavier nodded grimly and hummed ahead of Scott through the corridors to the elevator, then downstairs. Scott waited outside Cerebro's outer the door, letting Xavier hum alone into this huge, round room that both enhanced his natural abilities and focused mutant brain waves toward his mind. He slipped the helmet on and began mentally sorting through the barrage of mental noise, searching for Trent or Jubilee's specific patterns.

"Hello?" a small, soft voice suddenly said.

It was a young girl's voice. Startled, Xavier replied, "*Why, hello?*"

"*I've been watching you a long time,*" she whispered.

He was surprised again. "*Really? Who are you?*" Funny, he couldn't pinpoint any sense of her.

"*It's so peaceful here*" she sighed, ignoring his question.

"*You come here often?*"

"*I come---when I can.*"

"*Why? Is there something I can do for you? Do you need help?*"

"*I must go now.*"

Silence. "*Hello?*" Xavier repeated, but his thought just echoed back unanswered. He searched, but found nothing. It troubled him that either this child was in trouble or it was some kind of trick, though he couldn't imagine how that could be. Putting it aside, he focused again on Trent and Jubilee and, since he was better able to sense Jubilee, located her more easily. She was inside a compartment surrounded by a blur of passing scenery. He removed the helmet and hummed back out to Scott. "I can't get a clear location," he reported. "I think they're in a vehicle on the move, but I couldn't make-out any clear details. I'll have to try again later."

Scott nodded, sorry they couldn't take quicker action. He didn't trust Trent.

"Something else odd," Xavier went on, humming along beside Scott toward the elevator. "I think a little girl

spoke to me just now."

Scott's brows shot up in surprise. "How is that possible?"

"I didn't think it was."

By mid-morning, the whole school knew Trent and Jubilee had runaway. Rogue cautiously made a point of listening to everything said and asking casual, concerned questions in order to improve her own chances of successfully doing the same thing. For days she'd been carefully sneaking individual items she wanted to pack downstairs and concealing them in various downstairs closets, so when the moment came, she'd be able to quickly pack and slip away unnoticed. Guilt haunted her though, and she was constantly afraid the Professor might peek into her mind and discover her plan, though she knew it was his policy not to pry.

In Nashville, Trent and Jubilee caught another ride to Memphis and there tried to find another south-bound ride, preferably to a coastal city, mostly because he thought diving work might be more available, but no one was going that way. Stuck having to wait, they went into the truck-stop restaurant and camped out in a booth, sharing one order of breakfast. Then Jubilee dozed fitfully on his shoulder in between his trips outside to talk to every new trucker that pulled in until he finally found a guy going to New Orleans.

Meanwhile, Xavier, back in Cerebro again, was able to see Trent and Jubilee in that restaurant, but he still couldn't make out any clear identifiers to tell him precisely where they were beyond knowing they were in western Tennessee. He removed the helmet again with a deep sigh and hummed out, discouraged he'd hesitated about shipping Trent overseas. He prayed fervently for another chance, certain if Trent were foolish and the Navy caught him, he'd disappear forever this time.

It was late evening by the time Trent and Jubilee arrived in New Orleans. When their driver pulled into load-drop on the north side of New Orleans, they said their good-byes and hit the sidewalk on foot, walking out to the road where streams of headlights were buzzing both ways.

"I'm tired," Jubilee complained, "and hungry."

Irritated, Trent pulled out his wallet and counted what cash he had, which included her twenty. "We only have thirty-nine dollars total," he told her. "So you can't have both. We can either sleep or eat." Then, without waiting for her opinion, he made a decision and grabbed her arm. "Com'on, you have plenty of padding. You'll be okay without food for one night."

Jubilee jerked her arm angrily from his grasp and folded her arms stubbornly to her chest.

"What now?" he demanded angrily.

"You called me fat."

He heaved an exasperated breath. "You're not fat. I just said you wouldn't starve for one night."

"Why can't we eat, too?"

"We only have thirty-nine dollars. Barely enough for even a cheap room. If we're lucky, we might find one with a free breakfast."

Her lip pouted. "Part of that is my money. I should have a say."

"Fine." He angrily threw her twenty dollars to the sidewalk, about-faced and strode away.

Appalled he was just walking off without her, Jubilee snatched it up and ran after him. Eventually, he got directions from a passer-by who told them there was an old motel just beyond the over-pass they could see arching high above the street several blocks away. It was a long walk. Jubilee complained the whole way while Trent kept saying, "Shut-up!" When they finally reached it they found a forlorn-looking two-story brick building that had once been a Shoney's Inn, its neon vacancy sign missing a "y" and its old restaurant boarded-up beside it. Trent stopped short of the main entry and he made Jubilee stand near the meager hedge, out of sight. "Wait here," he ordered.

"Why?"

"Do you want a room or do you just wanna stand out here yapping? Make up your mind quick."

She folded her arms and glared sulkily at him. He spun on his heel and strode into the empty curry-scented lobby muttering, "Women!" under his breath. Behind the scratchy acrylic wall of the counter he saw a thin, young

girl with dark hair pulled back tightly in a bun, wearing glasses and reading a book. She looked up at his approach and pushed her glasses higher on her nose. "Can I help you?"

"I need a room for one," he lied.

"Alright." She tapped keys and examined her computer screen. "Will that be cash or charge?"

Trent leaned on the counter. "You know you're about the prettiest thing I've ever met." She nervously pushed her glasses up again and blushed. Trent laid his cash in view on the counter. "I'm traveling around the country on my bicycle, camping mostly, but tonight I thought I'd treat myself to a motel." He appealed to her with his stormy blue eyes. "I'm kinda low on cash though. You couldn't give me a break and let me have a room for closer to thirty could you, darlin'?"

Her eyes flicked uncertainly. He smiled. She glanced over her shoulder at the empty office as if afraid someone might be there to see her, then turned back, faintly smiling, though avoiding his eyes. "Okay. Just this once. I'll give you our senior rate." She tapped keys. "That'll be \$32.98 total. There's a complimentary continental breakfast provided until nine-thirty a.m."

Trent passed her thirty-three dollars through the slot and pocketed the rest. "Thanks. You don't know what this means to me."

"Just don't tell anyone," she replied, sliding the card-key to him. "I'd get fired."

He flashed her his best smile. "Don't worry." Then snatched up the card-key and sauntered back outside to Jubilee.

"Did you get it?" she demanded anxiously.

For reply, Trent just gave her an "are-you-a-moran" look and held up the key-card. Fortunately, this motel was the kind with doors all on the outside, making it easy for him to get them to their room without Jubilee being noticed. He opened the door and let her in, feeling quite pleased with himself. Jubilee just stood nervously clutching her small backpack as she watched Trent sprawl on the queen-sized bed with the remote. It was the only bed in the room.

He looked at her. "What's the matter with you?"

"Nothing," she hedged, then, seeing the bathroom as a refuge, announced, "I'm going to take a shower," and marched into it, locking the door behind her. She sat on the commode and put her head in her hands wondering what she'd gotten herself into. She didn't know what being in love should feel like, but she didn't think getting treated like Trent was treating her was part of it. She turned on the shower and stood in the hot water a long time, trying to figure out what to do next. When she finally walked out of the bathroom again, fresh in clean clothes and a white towel wound around her wet head, she had a plan. She plopped into the worn chair in the corner by the window.

"It's about time," Trent said, turning off the TV and stretching back. He put his hands behind his head and smiled coyly. "Say, what are you doing way over there?"

"You need a shower," she snapped evasively.

He chuckled. "Alright. I'll be right back."

Jubilee watched him stroll into the bathroom and soon as she heard the shower, she pulled the towel from her head, tossed it aside and slid in under the blanket so she lay on the top sheet. When Trent came back and tried to get in he'd find himself neatly separated from her. It wasn't much of a plan, but it was all she could think of on the spur of the moment. She covered her head and lay nervously listening to every sound, regretting she hadn't paid more attention to Miss Andi's talks on dating decisions and self-defense. One point she did remember, however, was her advice to use their mutant gifts to protect themselves. Finally she heard the shower stop, the bathroom door open, saw the light go out, then felt him slide into bed beside her.

"Hey, what's this?" he protested as soon as he realized they were completely separated.

"Touch me," Jubilee hissed, "and I'll blow you to bits." For demonstration, she poked one hand from under the covers and made one teeny-tiny globule explode above his head. He yelped, covered his eyes, then called her a stream of bad words, though she didn't care. She felt him turn over, but couldn't relax until she was certain he was

asleep and heard him lightly snoring. The next morning, she woke with a start, then, remembering her situation, lay perfectly still until she could determine where Trent was. She could hear him snoring and poked her head out from under the covers to see. He was on his back, his mouth slightly open. As covertly as she could, she slid out of bed and into the bathroom, hoping she could get out of the room without waking him, but when she came back out, his eyes suddenly flew open. She froze.

He stretched and smiled invitingly. "So, are you in a better mood this morning?"

"Is that all you ever think about?" she snapped.

His eyes darkened moodily, but he didn't lose the smile as he got up. She suddenly realized, just before the sheet slid entirely off, he was naked and, with a quick squeal, covered her eyes.

He laughed mockingly. "You're such a little girl. What did I ever see in you?"

She felt him brush past her and heard the bathroom door shut. She hurriedly grabbed her pack and said loudly, "I'm going to the lobby for breakfast," then left, tears brimming along her lids. She was tough, but not so tough his words didn't sting. She swiped the wetness away before reaching the lobby and, once there, surveyed the spread of cereal, muffins, bagels and donuts hungrily. She selected some of each then stuffed herself, the food soothing some of the emptiness she felt. Eventually, Trent sauntered in. Bitterly, her eyes followed him as he loaded up on milk, cereal and donuts then sat in front of her to devour them without even looking at her, when only two days ago it seemed he couldn't get enough of her. He finished and stood to leave.

"Where you going?" she asked.

"Back to the room. I've got a couple things to do before leaving."

"I'll wait here."

He shrugged. "Suit yourself."

She watched him walk out the door, figuring, since he hadn't turned the room key in yet, he'd be back, so she kept an eye on the front desk waiting for him to return, not quite willing to give up on him. About twenty minutes later, he was back, spoke at length with the desk clerk, pocketed some paper, then headed for the door. She jumped up and trotted after him. "Where are we going now?" she asked.

He gave her an annoyed look. "I'm going to see about a job."

They walked in silence as he periodically consulted his directions and looked for street signs. Her feet were already starting to ache. "Are we going to walk the whole way?"

Trent just stopped, surveyed her crossly, then glanced around. Spying a convenience store-gas station several blocks away, he pointed and said, "I have to take a leak. How bout you?"

She nodded eagerly. It was the first conscientious thing he'd said to her all morning and she could use a john. Inside the convenience store, just outside the restrooms, he said, "I'll meet you outside the front door," then disappeared into the men's room. Jubilee entered the ladies room, unaware that Trent, as soon as he was sure she'd gone in, ducked back out and dashed out of the store and down a side-street.

When she came out, Jubilee waited faithfully outside the front door for several minutes before finally giving into her growing suspicions. She went back inside. "Excuse me," she said to the younger of the two male clerks behind the counter. "Could you check in the men's room and see if my friend is alright?"

"What's your friend's name?"

"Trent."

He nodded and she trailed after him to the door of the men's room. He was back out in a split second. "No ma'am, there ain't no one in there. Maybe ya missed him."

She didn't think so. "Thanks, anyway," she said and he returned to his duties. Angry, she went back outside and sat broodingly on the curb thinking things through, sorry she'd ever gotten into this. Trent had not only ditched her, he'd also taken every red cent of her money with him and now here she was, stuck in this strange city without a dime to her name. Back in the old days, before Professor Xavier, she used to entertain people with her "fireworks" for a few bucks, but that had been in Venice Beach. Weird was normal there and almost unquestioned. She wasn't so sure how such things might be received in New Orleans, but it was a possibility and certainly better than the

embarrassment of calling for help. So, with that decided, she got up, went inside the store again and waited for a clerk to be free. This time it was the older, dour-faced one who looked at her impatiently.

"What's the biggest tourist spot around here?" she asked.

"The French Quarter."

"Where's that?"

The clerk looked at her like she had a booger on her nose. "On the river."

She tried a different tact. "Okay. How do I get there?"

"Buy a map."

She gave up and turned away. An older black man examining snacks at the end of an aisle nearby, hissed to get her attention. She looked and he smiled, waving for her to come over.

She edged cautiously near. "Yes?"

"Pay'em no mind, child," he told her cheerfully. "Ya want ta know where the Quarter be?"

She nodded.

He smiled and lead her outside, pointed, then explained directions to Canal Street, which would take her right to the west side of the French Quarter. "You can catch the street car," he said.

"Thanks," she replied, too proud to tell him she was penniless.

Back in Westchester, Jean was strolling down the shiny white underground corridor intent on checking on the Professor again. He'd been in Cerebro for hours and she was worried about him. He *was* sixty-five, after all. She found Cerebro's door still sealed and, frowning unhappily at it, was about to turn away when it suddenly unsealed and her mentor hummed out, his tired face first triumphant, then startled when he saw her. "Jean? What are you doing here?" he asked.

"Checking on you, as usual. You've been in there half the morning."

He checked his watch, then took her hand and patted it reassuringly. "It was worth it. I found them."

"Where?"

"In New Orleans. I want you, Andi and Logan to go after them as soon as you can get ready."

She smiled on him fondly. "Alright. I'll go, but only if you promise to get some rest."

"I promise," he assured her and they returned upstairs hand-in-hand.

When Jean walked into the garage, she found Scott loading Andi's and Logan's backpacks into the back of the SUV. He cheerfully took hers and added it pile, then closed the hatch and escorted her to right-rear passenger door. From there, he saw Logan and Andi leaning on the hood together, pouring over a road atlas. It was, at least, a twenty hour drive to New Orleans and though, Scott agreed Jean, Andi and Logan had the right combination of strengths and gifts to be the perfect interception team for Trent and Jub, he also hated trusting the two most important women in his life to Logan.

Jean drew Scott's face to look at her. "We'll be okay," she assured. He smiled and wrapped her in his arms, kissing her warmly.

Finished with the map, Logan strode briskly to the driver's-side door. "Let's go!"

Scott gave Jean a final kiss, got her settled inside the car, then walked around the vehicle determined not to let Logan leave without a final word.

Logan turned the ignition and revved the engine as he warily watched Scott approach, lowering his window irritably when he arrived. "What?" he sniped.

"I'm trusting you to keep an eye on these two," Scott cautioned, nodding toward his passengers.

"We're just picking up two kids. Don't get your shorts all in a wrinkle. Nothing's gonna happen."

Scott clasped his hands behind his back, while Jean and Andi just traded looks, both knowing better than to get involved. Logan smirked. "Since I do most of the work around here, I don't know how you're *ever* gonna manage without me."

Scott's lips twisted into a half-smile. "At least I'll have some peace and quiet for a couple days."

For reply, Logan dropped his arm outside the door, out of sight of the women, showed Scott his middle-finger, then backed out, satisfied his was the last word. As soon as were out the school gates, he adjusted all the windows for smoke and lit up one of his cigars. Jean wrinkled her nose as it's acrid odor reached her. Obviously he was ignoring Scott's no-smoking-in-the-school-vehicle rule, probably on purpose, but she knew all too well saying so would be a complete waste of time. Logan did whatever Logan wanted to do. Observing Andi quietly working her puzzle book and, considering how head-strong Andi was, she wondered how they were ever going to manage, then smiled and shook her head as she picked up her new book.

Of course, news about Coach Logan and Andi and Dr. Grey going after Trent and Jubilee spread like wildfire immediately throughout the student body. For Rogue, sudden Logan's departure made this the perfect opportunity for her own escape as well. So, as soon as everyone was asleep, she crept downstairs, collected her things from their hiding places, tucked them in her pack along with the teddy-bear Bobby had bought her and her diary, then went to the main office. Unlike Jubilee, Rogue knew the gate code, not because of Xavier, since her last sudden departure from the grounds a year had rendered her unworthy of that trust, but because of Jack. Back in the winter time, she'd come down to see him once when he was on weekend-duty and just happened to observe the code when Jack set it. She had a good mind for numbers and it was simple enough to memorize. She flushed hotly at the memory, sure her flirting was probably perfectly obvious to Jack, though he never let on and always treated her graciously. She turned off the gate surveillance camera, reset the gate-timer and strolled out the wrought-iron gate into the cool September night bound for the interstate truck stop and, hopefully, New York.

Even as Rogue was making her escape, Andi was driving south through Alabama with Logan in front beside her slouched in the corner dozing, and Jean, who'd driven last, curled-up asleep in back. By the time she pulled off just north of New Orleans for breakfast, Rogue was was threading her way through the rush of New York subway commuters hurrying indifferently to their jobs, looking for her next connection. She was headed for JFK and intended to catch a commuter flight to DC. She fingered the debit card in her pocket thoughtfully. She had Andi and Storm to thank for that. Even though her Dad wanted nothing more to do with her, last fall Andi and Storm finally persuaded her to, at least, write her Mom just to say she was okay. To her surprise, not only did her Mom secretly write back, but she began sneaking ten or twenty dollar bills in every letter, which made opening an account for her eventually necessary. She smiled sadly at the memory, sorry to leave so many friends behind, especially Logan. She sighed. She knew he'd promised to look after her and even though she felt guilty about it, she just couldn't have him following her. He'd just interfere. "He's gonna have a cow when he finds out," she muttered to herself.

In Louisiana, Logan was now behind the wheel, driving the last miles into New Orleans and Andi was on the cell-phone letting Xavier know they were ready for directions. Xavier promptly went down to Cerebro, sure it would be easier to pinpoint them now with all the landmarks a city would offer. Cerebro, though it allowed him to tap into mutant brain-waves almost anywhere in the world, could only amplify whatever a given mutant was either seeing or hearing around them and it was up to him to interpret those things. It was really more deduction, then science.

Upstairs, Kitty, Angelica, Allison, Darla, Jolene and Jade had all noticed Rogue's bed was empty as soon as they woke up, but they thought nothing of it, since, being a light sleeper, Rogue often rose early.

At JFK, Rogue took a deep breath and approached the ticket counter. The agent behind it barely raised her eyes. "Can I help you?"

"I'd like a one-way ticket to Washington DC as soon as possible, please," Rogue asked.

The agent tapped in the information and studied her screen. "Which airport?"

"Which one's closest to downtown?"

"Reagan National."

"That one."

"I have one seat open on the ten o'clock."

Rogue nodded and handed her card over.

The agent briskly ran it. "Any luggage?"

"No ma'am. Jus' carry on."

The agent nodded again, then handed Rogue her ticket. Rogue fretfully checked her wrist watch as she walked to her gate to wait and glanced cautiously around, afraid of her friends suddenly appearing to stop her, but saw only strangers minding their own business. She took a deep breath and told herself to relax, reminding herself they were all too wrapped up in finding Trent and Jub right now to even notice her absence and even if they did, she'd be long gone before they figured out where she was. And she was right because Charles Xavier was in Cerebro focused entirely on trying to isolate Jubilee and Trent. Perceiving they were no longer together, he focused on Jubilee as his priority, trying to see her surroundings.

"Hello," a girlish voice suddenly interrupted again.

Xavier started with annoyance. This wasn't an ideal time for a social call, yet this curious visitor was too unpredictable to push off. "Well, hello again," he thought in reply.

"What are you doing?"

"Looking for some friends of mine."

There was a silence. "Friends? What are friends?"

Xavier was taken aback. A child who didn't know what friends were? "Friends are people we spend time with because enjoy their company."

There was another silence. "You are my friend," she suddenly announced.

He chuckled. "Friends usually know each other's names. My name is Charles. And you are...?"

"Charles," the voice echoed. "That is a name?"

Again he was puzzled. "Yes. That's what I'm called. What are you called?"

Silence. "I will visit you again soon---Charles."

"Hello?" he thought, but no one answered. How strange. Puzzled, he set that issue aside for now and concentrated on Jubilee, trying to find something he tell his interception team.

Logan took an exit off the interstate, merged into street-level traffic, then found a place to park while they waited on the Professor. He stretched and yawned, then slouched against his door, facing Andi. "So, how long do you think this is gonna take?"

"Not long, I hope."

Jubilee was a little west of the French Quarter, having walked herself there yesterday afternoon. She'd spent the night wandering cautiously about, peering at all the sights of this quaint and raucous place. Music spilled out of taverns and restaurants and people swarmed the streets long into the night, streets heavily patrolled by policemen on foot who encouraged anyone they saw loitering to keep moving. That certainly put a damper on her trying any street entertainment and left her with nothing to do, but walk around tortured by the delicious smells pouring forth every restaurant she passed. Now, the rising sun found her in the Riverwalk Mall, sitting on an outdoor bench with her head propped against the stucco wall behind her, asleep until the sounds of people talking and moving about woke her. She rubbed her eyes, wearily got up and just started walking, hardly paying attention to where she was until she reached the Aquarium of the Americas. She just stopped and stared at the closed building, thinking how dumb this was, just walking around starving when she could call for help and go home. Swallowing her pride, she glanced around, but seeing no outside phones, started walking back in the direction of the Quarter looking for a public phone she could use to call Xavier's School for the Gifted, collect. In Cerebro, Xavier could see the Aquarium of the Americas and the rising sun Jubilee was squinting against, which told him she was headed east. He immediately hummed out of Cerebro into the corridor and grabbed the cell from his lap.

As soon as hers beeped, Andi put it to her ear. "Yes, Professor."

Logan started the SUV again as he listened to her say, "Okay, okay. Got it." She switched off and looked at him. "She's walking east from the Aquarium and she's alone."

Logan snorted. "The bum ditched her?"

"We'll know soon enough." Andi showed him on the map where they were and where they needed to be. He swung out into traffic, but miles of construction made it slow going.

"I hope she's all right," Jean murmured, having visions of a teen pregnancy.

While he waited for news, Xavier returned to his class, but a light knock on his door interrupted him. He paused as Storm peeked in and his students turned to see who it was.

"Yes, Storm," he said.

Smiling apologetically, she went to him and handed him a note. "Jubilee just called," she whispered, "I told her to wait where she was and that someone would be there shortly, then I called Andi."

"Good," Xavier whispered, relieved. "Very good. Thank you, Storm."

Logan was driving the SUV at a crawl. "There she is," Andi said, pointing at Jubilee, who was standing in front of a red-brick building adorned with window boxes of red geraniums. Logan parked and they all three hopped out, which caught the attention of a certain young man enjoying a sunny brunch at the sidewalk café next door. It was the two women he noticed first, since he was a ladies man, but it was the rough-looking bearded guy with them that really struck an odd cord and odder still was the New York handicapped plates on their vehicle when none of them appeared handicapped in the least. Remy Lebeau would later call it providence, but, for now, it made him fold his newspaper and settle his tab so he could indulge his curiosity. He also jotted down their license number on the back of his receipt, tucked it carefully into his vest then, tucking his paper under his arm, got up and stepped onto the cobble-stone walk to follow them.

Focused on finding Jubilee, Andi didn't even think about doing a mental scan for mutants and if she had, she would've discovered the curious mutant strolling at a distance behind them. He was a tall, squared-shouldered, good-looking man with his long, light hair tied back in a neat pony-tail and double gold loops piercing both his left eyebrow and his ear. On the surface, he looked like any other well-heeled urban professional in a sharply tailored black silk suit, but it was the deep maroon shirt under the black tie that signaled to in anyone in the know exactly what Guild he belonged to and what rank he held within it. Narrow, dark sunglasses covered his peculiar black eyeballs with their red irises. Posting himself against a wall with his paper, Remy watched this interesting trio converge on a young girl with slightly asian features, who promptly ran into the embrace of the tall auburn-haired woman.

"Are you all right?" Jean asked, stroking Jubilee's head. She just nodded.

"Where's Boland?" Logan demanded. Jubilee shrugged her shoulders, unwilling to turn and have him see her tears.

Jean rebuked Logan with a look and led Jubilee aside to comfort her and talk without any more rude interruptions.

He scowled after them, then turned his attention to Andi on the cell with Xavier. "We have her," she was saying. "But she doesn't know where Trent is." She listened, then said, "Okay," switched-off and slipped the phone back into its holder on her belt. "He's going back into Cerebro," she informed him. "He'll call when he has something." Logan opened an arm for her to join him and she came into it, encircling his waist with her own. She patted his side. "Tired?" she asked, looking into his reddened, hazel eyes.

"You know Boland's way more trouble than he's worth. I say leave him," he replied.

She sighed. "Well, the Professor will want us to try to bring him back, but I'm afraid that's exactly what it will come to."

"The Professor's has good intentions, but he's just gotta get used to things not always going his way. You let me do the talking, Angel. He'll see things our way."

Andi looked at him, not sure if that was really a good idea. Logan had all the tact of a Sherman tank. Her thoughts must of showed.

"Com'on. Trust me," he urged with that disarmingly charming cocky smile of his.

She smiled in return. "Alright." Then they both glanced at Jean and Jubilee, who seemed still engrossed in whispered conversation.

"It didn't go anything like I imagined, " Jubilee was telling Jean. "He didn't really care about me at all."

"Did you have intercourse?" Jean whispered.

The girl blushed bright red and shook her head and Jean was relieved. "Are you hungry?"

"Starving."

"Well, we'll just have to do something about that, won't we?" Jubilee smiled. and Jean put her arm around her to walk her back to Andi and Logan. "We need to get something to eat," Jean told them. Logan nodded and led the way back toward the SUV.

Remy Lebeau folded his paper and, seeing they were getting back in their vehicle, hurried to his own. He couldn't exactly explain why he was so inexplicitly intrigued by these strangers, but neither did he have anything else requiring his attention. So, he discreetly tailed them through traffic, back onto the interstate, then down an exit to fast-food joint, where he parked so he watch the restaurant entry in his rear view mirror and settled down to wait, idly twisting the expensive diamond wedding band on his finger. He was still too newly married to be used to it. It wasn't an ideal marriage, but rather an arranged one designed to make peace between his Guild and an opposing one belonging to his bride's father. Nor was it an arrangement entirely agreeable to everyone, particularly his new brother-in-law. Glancing in his mirror periodically, he went through two cigarettes before his curious visitors finally returned to their vehicle.

Inside the SUV, Andi was on the phone again with Xavier. "Trent's doing some kind of clean-up work at a new housing site called Riverwind Chateau," Xavier told her.

"Okay, got it," Andi replied and switched the phone off. "We need to stop at a Real Estate office."

"Which one?" Logan asked.

"Any one we can find. Boland's at some development called Riverwind Chateau."

Remy Lebeau followed them to a 21st Century Realty office, where he purred into the adjacent business's parking lot and watched a woman hop out of the SUV and go inside. It wasn't the tall auburn one, but the other one with the baseball cap. Remy lit another cigarette and took a drag. She returned promptly with what looked to him like a map and got back in the SUV.

"Dis just keeps getting mo' and mo' interestin'," he muttered to himself, as he hung his cigarette in his lips and shifted back into drive. Besides, he wasn't eager to go home anyway. The whole reason he was out and about was because his wife, Bela, had picked a fight with him this morning. He trailed the mysterious SUV back onto the highway and across the river, toward the largely residential southeast part on town, eventually arriving at a subdivision still in the early stages of construction. The entry sign read, "*Riverwind Chateau, a luxury community of the future.*" Remy guffawed at that as he hummed his hybrid sports car past it and into the subdivision, then slowed cautiously, surveying the first six of what would probably be dozens of homes, all in various states of construction arranged on a cul-de-sac. No contractors seemed to be around. Just a group of five men of varying ages working on one of the lots, shoveling construction debris into a long gray dumpster. His eyes flicked to the SUV that was now parking in front of that group. Suddenly, as soon as the bearded guy got out, one of the workers dropped his shovel and bolted away, fleeing through the homes deeper into the open development with the bearded-guy and his two lady companions in hot pursuit on foot.

Trent Boland had, after ditching Jubilee yesterday, found the bus stop he'd been looking for and had taken a bus to an oil company office, hoping for a job. Unfortunately, they weren't accepting entry level applications, so, he'd hunted up a pawn shop and hocked his watch, class ring and gold neck chain to give himself enough cash for cruising a night-spot or two and maybe getting picked-up by some sweet Southern Belle willing to take him home for the night, which is exactly what happened. Then, this morning, she not only fed him breakfast, but also dropped him off at a temp service, which is how he came to be shoveling debris into this dumpster now and when Logan suddenly pulled up, Trent dropped his shovel and ran.

Logan, Andi and Jean, each automatically spilt off in different directions after him as Trent raced deeper into the development, aiming at the distant tree-line, hoping he might find his way to the river. If he could, then he'd evade them indefinitely.

Lebeau, seeing where Trent was headed, suddenly gunned his car forward and tore down the dirt service road to cut him off. At just the right moment, he snapped up the emergency brake, skid his rear a hundred and eighty degrees around and sprayed Trent with so much grit he had to stop. Throwing his arms over his head to block the stinging sand, Trent found himself unable to move. Jean, who'd just arrived and was about ten feet behind him, hands delicately poised in the air, holding him in place even as she gasped to catch her breath. Logan and Andi arrived then and stopped breathlessly beside her, his lip dotted with sweat from the seventy-degree Louisiana heat, then all stared uneasily at the darkly-tinted windows of the black sports car that had just intervened.

Inside it, Remy peered back at them as he cautiously palmed one of his trademark playing cards from the deck tucked inside his jacket, then slowly got out. That at least one of them was a mutant was already clear.

"Help me" Trent implored Remy, "They're trying to kidnap me."

That drew Remy's gaze and Logan stepped forward warily, snapping his blades out. "I wouldn't," he growled. "This ain't none of your business, bub."

Remy took in those blades and corrected his earlier estimation. More than one mutant. He flashed a charming smile. "Don't worry, ami. Gambit agree. Dis not his bizness. He juz' nosy. He see you in de Quarter and wonder why two such lovely ladies be wit you."

Logan scowled, uncertain whether he'd just been insulted or not.

"You be mutants, no?" Gambit asked.

Beside Logan, Andi's eyes had gone dark as she mentally felt him. "He's a mutant too," she hissed, irritated at being caught so off-guard.

Hearing that, Gambit bowed politely toward them, then slid his sunglasses to the top of his head revealing his black eyes. "Oui. That I am." Jean nearly lost her concentration on Trent.

"Help me," Trent repeated.

Gambit nodded toward him. "And dis one?"

"What's it to ya?" Logan challenged.

Gambit shrugged. "Why you want him?"

Andi answered. "We rescued him from being experimented on by the Navy. They'll be after him if he stays in the open."

"I'd rather live free and take my chances than be a prisoner at your school!" Trent shouted.

"That's all we wanted to know," Logan retorted. "Let 'em go," he ordered Jean.

Jean looked uncertain, but obeyed. Trent, suddenly able to move again, turned and faced them crossing his arms stubbornly against his chest while Gambit observed in fascination.

"It's your funeral, bub," Logan asserted gruffly. "Let's go." He waited for the women to start off ahead of him.

Jean paused and looked back at Trent. "What do you want the Professor tell your Dad?"

"Nothing."

She nodded and walked ahead of Andi toward the SUV. Logan gave Gambit one final warning look before retracting his blades and falling in behind them.

The show over, Gambit slid his sunglasses back in place, pocketed the playing card and said, "Adyeu" as he walked past Trent. Opening his car door, Gambit scowled at the dirt on his Gucci shoes, tapped it off, then got in, checking the digital clock as he lit up another cigarette. It was nearly noon. He decided he ought pick up an appealing bouquet of flowers on his way home to help smooth things over and zipped away leaving Trent in his dust.

Trent, dodged the cloud of dirt and headed back to his job, inventing a suitable explanation for his coworkers as he went, surprised he was able to get rid of Xavier's people so easily.

Back in the SUV, Andi pulled out her Iridium phone and hit the button to Xavier. Logan held his hand for it and she gave it to him. He heard the Professor's voice. "Yes?"

"It's me" Logan said. "The kid didn't want to come, so we left him." There was no reply. He stared at the phone

face just to assure himself he was still connected. "Are you there?" he asked.

"Yes, Logan." Xavier replied.

"Boland said he'd wanted to take his chances with the Navy rather than come back with us. Besides, we couldn't just kidnap him---people were around."

Xavier sighed resignedly. "Very well. I suppose that is his choice to make. When will you be back?"

"In a couple days. We're taking it slower coming back."

"See you then." Xavier hung up.

Logan handed the phone back to Andi, who switched it off. "So, what'd he say?"

"It was Boland's choice."

"Did he sound okay about it?" Jean asked.

Logan shrugged. "If he isn't, he'll just have to get over it."

In Westchester, Charles Xavier stared moodily at the phone he'd just hung-up. Certainly, he wasn't pleased they'd left Boland behind, but neither was he surprised the lad hadn't wanted to come back. Well, he was of legal age, so be it. Rogue, however was another matter and she'd managed to disappear again without him even realizing she was gone---just like before. Clever girl. It was Storm who'd alerted him to her absence, but not until she noticed she was missing from her class and a mental scan of the premises quickly confirmed that. She had a big head start, too. Frustrated by this sudden knot of domestic problems, he blamed himself for not listening to his people, for not acting swiftly and for not keeping closer tabs on his children. He'd believed Rogue pretty well adjusted and couldn't fathom what might've motivated her to leave just now. Scott and Storm were interviewing all the students trying to track her activities for the past week, looking for clues and motivations and he intended to return to Cerebro after lunch to see if he couldn't find her.

In Louisiana, Logan only drove as far as the junction of I-10 and 12 north of New Orleans, then pulled off for lunch and a motel. They were all hungry, road weary and in need of a break. They ate, registered at a motel down the road, then Andi, Jean and Jubilee went upstairs to the double they were sharing on the second floor, while Logan retired to his room on the floor below them. Andi smiled as she pictured him already face down on his bed, exhausted and probably tired of being cooped up with women. As soon as Jean opened their door, Jubilee threw herself on the first king-size bed and curled up to sleep again, while she and Andi stretched out side by side on the other bed. Jean sighed. "It'll be good to get home."

"It sure will," Andi agreed, letting her eyes close.

None of them, least of all Rogue, knew what sort of vile trap she was about to walk into.

Continued in "The Runaways, Part 2"