

## Faith, Hope and Love, Part 2 by B Nickerson {Rated PG}

*"[Pain] removes the veil; it plants the flag of truth within the fortress of a rebel soul." ~C.S. Lewis~*

**Synopsis: Sometimes a man has to brought to his knees in order to look up.**

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According to plan, Jack, Ro and Bobby arrived in Jack's truck at the Westchester Greyhound parking lot well ahead of the bus. Selecting a slot with a good view of the depot, he parked, but left the engine idling to keep them warm, then handed out the breakfast biscuits. Gradually, a few more vehicles also arrived, their idling engines, likewise, spewing white clouds of exhaust into the icy air.

"There it is," Jack announced as the Greyhound later jounced into the parking lot, then pulled smoothly into it's slot along side the depot.

Other vehicle car doors flew open spilling a dozen or so adults and children of varying ages into the lot, all of whom promptly converged on the bus doorway. Ro waited until she felt sure it was safe for giving before giving Bobby a nod that it was time, then getting out of the truck with him, she angled toward her assigned look-out position at the rear of the bus while Bobby joined the crowd milling at the bus door. He waited, watching one passenger after another alight from the bus to the pavement. First came three uniformed Army dudes followed by a couple of heavy older women, then a very attractive college-aged girl, who, catching Bobby's eye, cast a demure smile. He smiled back, his gaze lingering after her as walked over to join an older woman and what appeared to be her younger sisters, all who embraced her.

"Hey, Drake!" a familiar voice called.

Startled, Bobby jerked his head back around, his gaze landing on a stocky, young bearded man wearing dark sunglasses, a gray knit cap and a grungy overcoat. The beard suddenly split into a wide grin and he raised his sunglasses revealing the distinctive stormy blue eyes Bobby would've known anywhere as Trent Boland's.

Forcing a smile, Bobby stepped forward, his hand out for a handshake.

Boland gripped it. "Long time, no see, dude."

"Yeah, long time," Bobby echoed, then, abruptly pulled Boland into his embrace, like a long lost pal, then hissed into his ear, "Just go along with whatever I say." After that, he let Boland go. "Uncle Jack and Aunt Ro are here, too," he said, using the pre-planned code.

"Old Uncle Jack and Aunt Ro, huh?" Trent suavely repeated. "How is ol' Uncle Jack and Aunt Ro?"

"Same. You got any other stuff?"

"Na, just this," Boland said, patting the backpack slung on his shoulder.

"Good, then let's go," Bobby replied, heading toward Jack's black king-cab truck.

Boland automatically fell in beside him. "Where is good ol' Aunt Ro anyways?"

"Right here," Ro said, suddenly appearing at Boland's side.

"Aunt Ro!" he exclaimed. "How about a smooch for your long, lost nephew?"

"In your dreams," she returned.

Boland snorted.

Bobby opened the king cab's passenger door and sent Boland in first, then followed him in while Ro got in the front passenger seat.

"Hey, Uncle Jack, how's it hanging?" Boland cheerfully asked.

"Stow it, squid," Jack snapped as he shifted into drive.

Trent Boland just slumped morosely as the truck bumped out of the lot and into the street, muttering, "Man, my relatives really stink."

The main driveway at Xavier's school had a gravel service road that branched off of just short of the garage and led around to the rear entry of Xavier's private quarters on the east side of the mansion. It was this gravel road that Jack turned down and stopped in front of flagstone patio that lay in front of the Professor's kitchen door. "All ashore who's going ashore," he announced.

"See ya, coach," Bobby said, hopping out and Boland gave Jack a mock salute before doing the same.

"Thanks, Jack," Ro added, getting a quick wink in reply. Jack pulled away as she led her little troop up the

wheelchair ramp, the kitchen door opening of its own accord, bidding them enter.

They found Charles Xavier seated in his wheel-chair at the white-tile topped breakfast table reading a newspaper. "You had no difficulties, I take it," he said without looking up.

His furry black cat, Celine, who had been up on the window sill above the kitchen sink, jumped down now to weave lovingly around Ro's legs. "Not a bit," she replied, leaning down to give the cat's ears a scratch.

A empty chair at the kitchen table abruptly scooted back and Xavier raised his eyes to Trent. "Have a seat," he directed and Boland slumped into it, then after a slight pause, also removed his sunglasses and lay them on the table with a aggrieved look at Xavier.

Xavier neatly folded his paper to one side. "Thank you," he said with a nod to Ro and Bobby. "I believe I can take it from here."

With that, Ro and Bobby left, walking out of the kitchen and through Xavier's sitting room, then exited out the double doors into the East corridor. Here, Ro stopped and turned on Bobby with sternly folded arms. "Don't think for a minute I didn't notice you looking at the pretty girl and not paying attention."

Bobby's cheeks colored. "Just for a sec," he countered.

Ro shook her head disapprovingly. "We can't afford even a second of distraction in our business, Mr. Drake. You know mutants exist who are perfectly capable of looking like some sweet, young thing for the sole purpose of diverting your attention."

"I forgot to think of that," he muttered.

"Fortunately, nothing came of it. *This time*. When we're out on a mission, no matter how inconsequential, I want you to *stay on focus*."

"Yes, ma'am. Focus. I'll work on it."

Ro gave him a nod of satisfaction, then continued on her way to her room on the third floor. She was looking forward to sharing it with Alex after they married, though the actual marriage proposal seemed to keep getting pushed further and further into the future. She'd been expecting him to fly out over Christmas vacation for the express purpose of proposing---but recently he'd been saying that plan might not work out, that he might not be able to get away. Demands of his sheriff job and all that. So, right now, it looked like the engagement ring wouldn't be happening until after New Year's, which was a huge disappointment. She'd been so looking forward to him coming at Christmas. It made her sigh just thinking of it. Reaching her door, Ro found a square yellow sticky attached to it. It simply read, "*See me ASAP, Scott.*"

"*What could he possibly want,*" Ro thought dourly, her previous thoughts about the engagement delay having soured her mood. Scott had been pretty much absentee from both school and team business ever since his return anyway, so what he suddenly had an opinion about that required "ASAP" attention she couldn't imagine. Removing the note, she tossed it into the waste basket as she walked in and proceeded to change clothes. She switched out of her jean-jacket, pulling on a thigh-length turquoise tunic-sweater over her white turtle neck instead and finishing it off with a wide belt around the hips, then headed downstairs to Scott and Jean's room to see what the young Mr. Summers wanted. She'd barely rapped a knuckle on their door when it flew open and she was face to face with Scott.

"I need to know the travel arrangements you've made for Boland," Scott promptly demanded.

This didn't help Ro's foul mood. "I don't need you checking up on me!" she snapped in return, spinning on her heel to stomp back upstairs---but Scott's hand flashed out and caught her shoulder before she could escape.

"I'm *not* checking up on you, Ro. I swear," he replied quickly in a more conciliatory tone.

Ro skeptically turned back around to regard him with arms folded.

Scott leaned a shoulder against the door frame and smiled a casual reassuring smile. "I'd just like to hear the details of what's going on, that's all."

"It's not a big deal," she replied guardedly. "Weir is sending up his jet tomorrow night and we're putting Trent on it. The Professor is just sending him to live with a friend of his in England. That's it."

"Surely *not* by himself."

Ro squared her shoulders. "Of course not," she shot back with righteous dignity. "Jack's going with him."

"Oh, yeah? Good choice. So where and when?"

"Why all the third-degree?" she retorted defensively.

Scott just gave a shrug with an indifferent air. "I'm just interested, but, like you said, it's no big deal."

Ever the skeptic, Ro hesitated, privately debating whether to answer or walk away. It occurred to her that it might be his way of getting plugged back in and, relenting, decided to tell him. It would do no harm for him to know---or so she thought. "Middleburg field, seven o'clock," she relied.

"Sounds good. You're doing a great job, Ro," and shut the door on her, leaving Ro to stomp off in a huff.

Both his smile and indifferent air immediately vanished as soon as he turned around. He was all business now, striding directly to the phone on his bedside night table, a man intent on a mission.

"That was rude," Jean chided him, having watched this whole proceeding with both surprise and misgiving. She knew his look of being in "strategizing mode" well enough and all this interest in Boland's travel arrangements gave her a really bad feeling. "Whatever are you up to?" she asked.

Scott, however, was already punching buttons on the hand-held and put it to his ear, his only reply to her being an upheld index finger to indicate she be silent.

That was it. Outraged, Jean whipped around with an offended sniff, turning her back on him and folding her arms irritably. Scott had been more taciturn than ever since his return from prison, but this morning, he was nigh unbearable and her patience at an end.

"Hey, Jack," he said into the phone behind her. "How about doing me a little favor? Let me fly with Boland instead of you."

At this, she spun around to gape at him in disbelief.

"Sure I feel up to it," Scott continued. "Okay, great! I'll meet you outside the garage on the service road tomorrow night at about six-thirty. Right. Oh, and I'd appreciate it if we could keep this between you and me. Okay, you too. Bye." He replaced the phone in its charger, then pointed at her. "And I don't want you to say a word about this to anyone either," he ordered.

Jean felt the prickly heat of fury burn through her. "I won't promise *anything* without an explanation," she snapped stubbornly, though Scott had already turned away, apparently not even hearing her. Worry quickly replaced anger as she went to him, took him by the arms and turned him toward her. He seemed lost in his own world. "Why are you doing this, baby?" she asked urgently, "Why are you asking Jack to let you fly with Trent?"

He seemed to recognize her like someone jarred from a dream, then just shook himself free of her grasp and walked toward the loveseat. "It's just something I've decided," he threw back.

Jean's arms fell limply to her side in dismay. "But why? I don't understand."

"What's to understand?"

"You're barely recovered," she argued, following. "You're only now getting your strength back and there's your rib to consider...*what* if something happens? You're hardly in any fit condition to defend yourself."

He grabbed the TV remote and flopped into the loveseat. "Nothing's going to happen. I'll be fine." Then flicked on the TV.

"Well, I think it'd be better if I went with you."

"No."

Jean stood in front of the television, blocking his view, her hands on her hips. "And why not?"

He regarded her with exasperation. "It's just a simple there-and-back thing, Jean. It's nothing. I'll be back in a day. It's no big deal."

"Us going to Turkey was just supposed to be a there-and-back thing, too, and I went with you for that. I'd feel better if I went with you."

This only got her a look such as she'd never ever seen Scott turn on *her*. His pupils flared like tiny novas in his red onyx glasses indicating the level of his fury, a look in times past she'd only ever seen aimed at some enemy, some doer of unrighteousness. She gasped, shocked.

"Don't you get it? I don't want you to come with me," he ground out through clenched teeth.

At this Jean whirled and fled downstairs to the sanctuary of her lab. Deeply wounded she cried her heart out a long, long time. Then she tried thinking of how she might stop Scott. It would be easy enough. She'd just have to tell the Professor and he would restrain Scott until Weir's jet was long gone---but at what cost? She could imagine the outcome. If this was as important to Scott as he seemed to act like it was, then restraining him would only end in him resenting her all the more. Reluctantly, she had to concede the only realistic thing to do was let Scott do what he wished.

The next night at the appointed time, Scott was out beside the service road, duffel in hand, waiting for Jack. It was bitter cold outside, but the sky was clear allowing him to gaze reflectively at the twinkling stars. He'd succeeded in slipping out without anyone seeing him, even Jean. She'd pretty much been avoiding him yesterday's argument. In one way he felt bad about that, but in another, he was relieved being able to escape having his actions constantly questioned. He had reasons for what he was doing and why he was going alone, good reasons he didn't want to have to explain or justify to anyone---at least until he got back. *Then* he'd explain everything to her and make things right.

Jack picked him up right on time. Boland was already in front seat of the king cab, so Scott got in the back and Jack delivered them to the small aircraft terminal in Middleburg, where he walked with them as far as the security check point that blocked the exit onto the tarmac. There, he gave them a jaunty salute, then strode away leaving Scott and Boland to check through and walk through the freezing wind toward the glistening white jet waiting for them.

Scott strode briskly, leaving Boland to have to trot to keep up, indifferent to his grumbling about it. He was far too absorbed in his own issues to care. He was actually terrified of getting on that jet—a jet once more bound for overseas. Dozens of “what if’s” were already swirling around his mind about being arrested and thrown in jail again. He knew it was unlikely---yet knowing that didn't at all stop the anxiety. It persisted. It made him light-headed and his breathing come quick and shallow. He desperately wanted to turn around and walk back into the nice safe terminal and it was taking every ounce of gumption he had to make himself *keep* walking toward that jet. That's why he couldn't let Jean come. He didn't want her to know that the mere thought of flying overseas where he might be captured or tortured was giving him anxiety attacks, because if she knew, then the Professor would find out and if the Professor knew, well---that would be the end of his flying the X-jet. He'd be grounded. So, he was giving himself a little “behavioral therapy.” He was going to condition himself out of his fear by making himself face the very thing he feared—he was going to get on Weir's jet, fly to England, drop Boland off and fly back---and hopefully, once he proved to himself his worse fears didn't happen, he'd be better. That was his plan anyway.

Reaching the jet, Scott stared at the steps a long moment before finally taking a deep breath and walking up them. He stopped just inside the door to gaze around the jet's familiar blue interior and felt Boland jostle past him. Seeing it again brought back a rush of memories he'd entirely forgotten. He remembered the living room set-up of the place with the pair of dark blue lazy-boy seats he and Jean had sat in facing a round coffee table and the love-seat sized sofa opposite them built into the wall. To his right was the same black leather-covered bar and flat screen TV mounted on the wall behind it. Straight ahead was the arched hatchway to the galley, where he vaguely remembered sitting with Weir and Andi.

No one seemed around. “Anyone home?” he called.

A woman appeared in the arched hatchway of the galley attired in a navy blue pants suit. Her appearance brought forth another rush of memories from his last trip. This was Sam Hamblin, Weir's co-pilot, who's so daringly flirted with him right under Jean's nose. Her lovely face suddenly brightened. “Mr. Summers, I hadn't expected to see you again so soon!” she gushed, crossing to him and seizing his hand and holding it pressed between hers.

“Scott,” he corrected. “I'm the last minute sub.”

Her grip tightened as she continued looking into his face glowingly. “I'm just *so* very glad to see you!” Trent cleared his throat.

Scott quickly withdrew his hand from her grasp and introduced him. “Trent this is Samantha Hamblin. Miss Hamblin, this is our charge, Trent Boland.”

She offered Trent her hand and he shook it. “Just call me Sam,” she said.

“Sure thing,” Trent agreed with a wolfish grin.

Sam just returned a perfunctory smile. “Well, since you two haven't much in the way of luggage,” she said, after surveying what they carried, “how about stowing your things over there,” and pointed at the cabinet under the loveseat sofa. Then she moved to the entry-hatch to close and secure it, giving them the standard safety briefing as she did so: “Seat-belts until we reach altitude. Oxygen masks will drop if we should lose cabin pressure. Flotation devices are under the seats. Exits are marked.” At this point she turned around. “Snacks and sodas are in the galley. Help yourselves.” Then she nodded to Trent politely, but smiled at Scott, then headed back through the arched hatchway.. “Enjoy your flight,” she called back before turning and disappearing from sight.

Scott immediately set about stowing his duffel in the sofa cabinet as directed, eager to be busy and conceal his momentary fluster at Sam's attentions from Trent, though he found them pleasantly flattering.

Trent flopped into one of the plush lazy-boy seats behind him. "Now that's what I call one *fine* looking woman," he remarked.

"Just toss me your pack," Scott ordered gruffly, oddly annoyed that Trent should take such notice of Sam. Trent obeyed and Scott stowed his pack, then took the other lazy-boy and pulled out a paperback to read. It was one of Jean's suspense novels, not his favorite genre. Merely convenient. He stared at the page, trying to concentrate on reading it, though really his mind was elsewhere...thinking about Sam.

"I could use a drink," Trent announced.

Scott eyed him irritably. "You heard Sam. Soda and water in the galley."

Trent thumbed back towards the bar. "I was thinking of something a little stronger."

"Soda or water," Scott repeated firmly.

"Spoil-sport," Trent retaliated.

"Beggars can't be choosers."

Trent heaved out of his seat and grumbled all the way into the galley and back again, soda in hand.

"You're lucky to even be here," Scott reminded him as he sat down again.

For reply, Trent just popped the soda tab, took a big gulp, then looking straight at Scott, emitted a loud belch.

Scott chose to ignore him. Fortunately, they weren't in the air twenty minutes before Trent was stretched back in his seat snoring like a freight-train, soda still in hand. Scott carefully removed the can from his fingers and placed it a cup-holder, then focused on his book, really trying to actually *read* it this time.

He hadn't gone three pages when he heard a faint hiss. Peering around his seat toward the sound, he saw Sam in the hatchway, beckoning him to join her. She held up a empty coffee urn, pointed at it, mimed pouring into a cup and drinking it, then gave him questioningly arched brows. She turned the away and vanished back into the galley, but Scott recognized the invitation and it only took a split second to decide a hot drink was way preferable to Trent's snoring. So, laying aside his book, he got up and sauntered into the jet's small galley where he found Sam busily filling the coffee maker's tank,

She threw him a smile. "How do you like it? Your coffee, I mean?"

"Actually I prefer hot tea with cream and sugar," he answered, sliding into a bench-seat at the table.

"We can do that," she said, filling a mug with water and putting it into the microwave. "You're looking pretty well recovered from your ordeal in Turkey."

He just smiled wanly.

She glanced at him. "Or is that a sore spot?" she perceptively asked.

"You could say that."

The microwave chimed and she set the mug on the table in front of him. "Sorry."

He waved the matter away. "Don't worry about it," he said as she added a tray of assorted teas, sugars, flavored creamers and disposable stir-sticks to the table.

Locating a tin of butter cookies in a cabinet, Sam brought them with her as she slid into the booth opposite him, putting the open tin on the table between them. "You may not remember, but I *did* look in on you while we were flying back. You happened to wake up and look *right* at me.

He felt oddly touched that she had done so, but it was nothing he remembered, though he read a bit of hopefulness in her eyes that he might. So, he did the chivalrous thing. "That was you?" he replied gallantly. "I thought I was seeing my guardian angel."

This made her chuckle. "That is so very sweet of you to say...but you don't *really* remember, do you?"

He gave her a game smile. "Well, actually...no. I was pretty out of it..."

"That's alright."

While she was preoccupied with selecting a cookie, Scott had a chance to study her. She appeared to be of Italian heritage. Her skin had that fine olive-tone and her hair was the dark color of espresso with copper highlights. She wore it in an asymmetrical cut, short in back, but long on either side of her face with one side longer than the other. Her eyes were a deep chocolate brown accentuated with soft blue shadow and strong line of eye-liner behind long, dark lashes. Her lips were full and shiny with reddish gloss.

Scott quickly diverted his eyes before she looked at him again as she nibbled her chosen cookie. "Ever been to London before?" she asked.

“Just Germany,” he replied. Of course, that had been a couple years ago when he'd accompanied Xavier to visit his friend, Gunter Dietrich, who ran a similar mutant academy there, but Sam didn't need to know that. So, he re-directed the conversation. “So, how'd a girl like you end up working for a guy like Weir anyway?” he asked, blatantly curious to understand their exact relationship.

Sam laughed. “Oh, so we're going to talk about me now. I see how it is. Alright, if you must know I first met Ben at a Washington party. It was one of those big-wig kind. I was still flying for a private outfit back then and one of the clients invited me to come with him. He may have been hoping for a little more than a just a pretty escort, but he was disappointed.” She laughed again, a sparkling laugh like champagne spilling over. “As it turned out, it was Ben I went home with.”

Scott practically gagged on his tea. That was *not* what he'd expected.

“You okay?” she asked.

He nodded as he coughed a little and cleared his throat. “Tea---wrong way,” he croaked. “I'm okay.”

She glanced toward the now full coffee urn, then at her watch. “Well, break time's over. I need to get Max his coffee and get back to work.”

She got up and Scott watched her while she filled two dark blue ceramic mugs, then returned to the table to doctor them, since the tray of sugars and creamers were in front of him. He followed her manicured hands as she worked, as if mesmerized, his eyes even following one hand as she lifted it toward his face and traced the curve of his chin, then let her fingers ruffle through the new growth of his goatee. He didn't even pull back.

“I like...very much,” she said purred, then, withdrawing her hand, picked up her mug and walked away from him toward the cockpit, Scott's eyes on her swaying hips until she disappeared through the cockpit door. He then collected his tea mug and a couple cookies, his conscience chiding him fitfully that he was out of line, but he ignored it. “Admiring a beautiful woman is like admiring fine art,” he told himself, “And what harm is there in just looking?” and went back to his seat beside a still snoring Trent Boland.

The jet landed at England's Stansted Airport just shortly after eight a.m. And, as soon as it came to a full stop, Scott was up getting his duffel and overcoat. He was really looking forward to a quiet nights sleep on the flight back. He was bone tired, since Trent eventually awakened and Scott had found it necessary to keep an eye on him so Trent wouldn't get into the liquor bar, so they'd watched movies together the whole flight.

Sam paused in the galley hatchway. “I'll be with you boys in a sec. Just give me a minute to change, then we'll be on our way,” she announced, then disappeared.

Scott promptly hurried after her. “Hey, wait a minute!” he called, catching up to her just outside the rear cabin. “You don't have to do that,” he said as she turned to regard him inquiringly. “Go with us, I mean. I can handle it.”

“I'm quite sure you can,” she answered as she continued into the cabin, “but that isn't the issue.”

She made to bend over to pick up a suitcase, but Scott quickly stepped the cabin to get it for her and lift it onto the bunk.

“I always appreciate a gentleman,” she said as she unzipped and opened it, exposing a raft of lacy unmentionables.

Scott uncomfortably averted his eyes. “And what exactly is the issue?”

“I've been instructed by Mr. Weir to personally assure Mr. Boland's delivery to his new residence and to also assure that you, handsome sir,” she said, giving his chest a light poke, “get back on this plane unscathed. He doesn't want any more trouble and, after what happened in Turkey, *I'm* not letting you out of *my* sight.”

Scott suddenly felt as tongue-tied as a high school kid just finding out his new lab partner was the class Prom Queen.

“Was there something else?” Sam asked, “Or were you planning on staying here and watching me change?”

Her tone was teasing, but in her eyes was a double-dog-dare. “Uh...no,” Scott stammered, rapidly backing out of the cabin. “I think I, uh, should just wait out here, in the main cabin.”

In his haste Scott practically fell over Trent, who was standing in the narrow aisle directly behind him, and his lecherous grin also informed Scott he'd heard that whole conversation. Scott glared at Trent. “Move or get walked over,” he snapped. “You pick.”

Trent stood aside and with an exaggerated sweep of the arm, mockingly ushered Scott past. Scott strode

by with Trent trailing on his heels after him like a bad habit.

“I would've stayed,” Trent insidiously hissed behind him.

“No one asked for your opinion,” Scott retorted.

As they walked back into the main cabin, they found Max just opening the outer hatch. He lowered the steps, then turned and acknowledged them with a nod. He was a tall black man with a slight paunch at the belt-line and salt and pepper hair he wore shorn close to his scalp, though his mustache was still untouched by any gray. “You boys be careful,” he cautioned, then raising his eyes beyond them, added, “And you, too, Missy.”

“You know I always am,” Sam's voice replied.

Scott and Trent both turned, Trent letting go a low wolf whistle. Sam was in the arched galley hatchway. The navy jacket had been replaced by a hot pink sweater that fit her like it'd been painted on. She was pulling on a black leather jacket as she joined them, flashing Scott a quick smile as she came to his side.

“You know where I am if you need me,” Max told her.

“I have the phone,” she assured him, then looked at Scott and Trent. “Okay, boys, let's go,” she said and breezed down the jets steps, striving confidently toward the terminal with Scott and Trent following her like a pair of ducklings.

Inside the terminal, it didn't take long to find the car rental agencies. They were lined up right on either side of the International Concourse's main entry directly opposite the Bureau de Change, which is exactly where Sam left Scott and Trent to wait while she got the car.

Trent was leaning against the Bureau's glass, his hands in his pockets. “Is she hot or what?” he idly observed.

Scott was standing a pace off from him with his arms folded. “I'm married,” he snapped.

“Oh, come on,” Trent scoffed, “you can't tell me you *haven't* looked.”

Scott kept his gaze focused into space straight ahead of him, though he couldn't stop his cheeks from warming.

“She's really sending you the signals, man.”

“I have no idea what you mean.”

Trent now moved around, positioning himself in front of Scott, hands on his hips, peering rather hard at his glasses. “I didn't think you were *actually* blind under those things,”

“What do you know,” Scott obstinately replied, though his glance now drifted curiously towards Sam across the way at the Avis counter. He did realize they'd been trading a little harmless flirting, but it'd never occurred to him to think there was any more to it.

“I know you're here and she's here and I know you're a thousand miles from home where no one's going to have any idea what you're doing,” Trent asserted. “We had a motto in the Navy that anything that happens away, stays away. So, you don't have to worry about me. My lips are sealed. As far as I'm concerned we're just having a nice drive in the country.”

Scott now peered sternly down the younger man in front of him. “Just shut-up,” he ordered.

“Losers weepers,” Trent hissed tauntingly as he moved aside, faced forward and put on a nonchalant smile as Sam was headed back. She was holding the key to their new rental aloft, cheerfully dangling it for them to see.

It was easy enough to find the car and soon they were on the road headed out of London north toward Cambridge. Sam was driving, Trent was in stretched out in the back seat already snoring and Scott was in the passenger seat trying to focus on passing scenery, though Trent's words haunted him. He kept finding himself casting askance glances at Sam's pretty profile and speculating on those so-called signals and what they might mean. That a beautiful older and completely *human* woman such as Sam might actually be attracted to such a decidedly abnormal mutant as himself was alluringly fascinating, particularly since he'd never in his life been much of a “chick magnet.”

Twenty minutes later they were in Cambridge and in another ten they were at the Professor's friend Dr. Eli Kaufmann's home. His house was in an older sub-division of matching two-story brick homes, each with a red-tile roof and fronted by a neat row of hedges. Massive Elms lined the streets, their bare limbs reaching for the overcast winter sky. Seeing the Kaufmann's car occupied the short driveway, Sam parked on the street, then the three of them trooped up the walk to the front door with Scott in the lead. He pressed the doorbell.

A grinning Eli Kaufmann flung it open. He was a tall, lean bean-pole of a man with a stack of wavy black hair on his head and matching beard on his chin. It was hard to believe he was Professor Xavier's age.

"Come in, come in," he boomed warmly. "Welcome!"

Scott offered him his hand as they stepped in. "I'm Scott Summers."

Kaufmann wrung his hand heartily. "Of course, Charles speaks of you often. Call me Eli." He looked at Sam. "And this must be your lovely wife, Jean?"

"I only wish," Sam replied as she also shook his hand. "I'm Sam Hamblin."

Scott blushed. "Miss Hamblin is our, uh, transportation facilitator," he hastily filled in, then quickly diverted Kaufmann's attention to Trent. "Dr. Kaufmann, let me introduce your new charge, Trent Boland. Trent, Dr. Kaufmann."

Trent stepped forward and offered his hand. "I appreciate this, sir."

"Eli," Kaufmann repeated, pulling him inside and shaking his hand vigorously. "Come, my wife has tea ready."

They followed him into a sitting room where a woman with short silver hair and wearing a salmon sweater twin set with a black broom skirt was seated in a brightly upholstered wing-chair. She rose to meet them, tall and willowy, nearly her husband's height.

"My wife, Anna," Eli introduced.

"Won't you have seat," she invited.

Scott chose the afghan covered sofa and sat in the center facing the two wing-chairs. Trent and Sam sat on either side of him. There was a tea service on the colorfully tiled coffee table in front of them, it's teapot under a quilted cozy that looked like a rooster. Anna removed it and began pouring tea while Eli took a wing-chair and plied Scott with questions, eager for news of Charles Xavier and his school.

A half-hour passed before Trent finally got tired of the banter. "I understand you had a room for me?" he interjected at a convenient pause.

"Oh, how thoughtless of us," Anna exclaimed. "We were so happy to see you, we forget how tired you must be!" She looked at Eli. "Why don't you show him to his new flat, luvy."

Eli hastily put down his teacup. "Righto. This way." Then lumbered toward the stairs.

"Righto," Trent echoed in kind, shouldering his pack and following. Scott also went along for purposes of giving Xavier a full report.

On the second floor, Eli identified the first door on the right as being his and Anna's room, then the next as the "loo" or bathroom and the last door, which was on the left, he opened for Trent. It was a large, homey-looking room, simply furnished with two single beds topped with blue quilts, two wooden bureaus and two wooden student desks. Between the beds was a single window with crisp white curtains and, on the floor, a blue braided rug.

"This was our boys room when they growing-up," Eli said proudly. "And now it's yours." He gave Trent's shoulder a friendly squeeze. "We're glad to have you, lad," then, after an encouraging smile, left.

Trent tossed his pack on the nearest bed as he eyed his new accommodations.

"You'd better make the most of this," Scott warned.

"Don't worry, I've already had the lecture."

"Then you know this is your last chance."

Trent wheeled around. "Don't you have a plane to catch?"

Smirking, Scott just turned for the door.

"Oh, and give my regards to Sam," Trent slyly added, earning a last hostile back-glance from Scott. He just returned a wicked grin and wink. "Don't do anything I wouldn't."

Scott just turned his back on Trent and headed for the stairs, quite irked. He'd done his duty. Trent was safely delivered. He could check the "mission success" block and finally get some much deserved shut-eye on the flight back. He'd been awake for over twenty-four hours and was feeling it. Returning to the living room, he found Sam intently chatting with Mrs. Kaufmann.

"Trent's all settled in," Scott announced. "Time to go."

Sam set aside her teacup. "It was a pleasure to meet you," she told Anna as she stood.

"Likewise, my dear. Do come back anytime."

Dr. Kaufmann escorted them to the door. "We'll get on just fine," he assured Scott as they traded a final handshake. "Tell Charley not to worry."

Scott smiled, amused to hear the Professor called “Charley,” though he wasn't so assured they would get on fine. “I'll pass it on,” he promised, then with a final wave goodbye, he and Sam walked back to the rented car.

“The Kaufmann's seem like nice people,” Sam observed as started the vehicle. “Are they mutants as well? Is that why we're leaving Mr. Boland with them?”

“I couldn't say,” Scott replied ambiguously.

“Oh, I see. You don't think I should know that,” Sam observed wryly, then laughed. “Don't worry, your secret's safe with me. It's part of the job.”

“And what job would that be?”

“Being Mr. Weir's girl-Friday. I do whatever needs done and I know whatever needs knowing to get it done.” She glanced at him. “Who do you think arranged your hotel in Turkey or came running when you didn't show up at the plane or kept photo surveillance on that internment camp?”

“Considering how you two met, I have to wonder how far this girl-Friday stuff goes,” Scott retorted.

“You mean, are we *dating*?” Sam laughed. “Heaven's no. Mr. Weir doesn't date his employees. Company policy.” She regarded him coyly. “Feel better?”

“It answers my question,” Scott carefully replied. “Not that it matters.” Though, oddly, it did make him feel better to know, though he had no intention of admitting it.

“*If* it didn't matter,” she replied in a more sultry tone, “you wouldn't have asked.”

He smiled noncommittally and changed the subject again. “So, how long have you been a pilot?”

That got her to explaining how she'd gotten her initial flight training through Air Force Aero Clubs while she'd been active duty as a military police officer. Then, when her six enlistment ended, she joined the D.C. police force, working for them ten years while in her free-time up-grading her flying licensing until she was commercial pilot qualified and could fly private executive jets full time. That had been four years ago. Based on that, Scott calculated her age as around thirty-eight. “Any family?” he asked.

“Two parents, one younger sister and two ex-husbands,” she replied, then chuckled. “I finally figured out I like men too much to stay tied-down to any one of them.” Then flashed him a mischievous smile.

“Uh...no kids?” he asked.

“Nope. Footloose and fancy free.”

Outside the car window he glimpsed the directional sign for the Stansted Airport exit a split-second before they breezed right by it. “Hey, wasn't that our turn?” he asked.

She gave him a sly smile. “I'm kidnapping you for a little while. Do you mind?”

He was quietly startled, part of him excited by the prospect, part of him unsure what to make of it.

Sam suddenly burst out laughing. “You should see your face! But don't worry. I just need to run a little errand before we leave. There's a certain coffee shop in London where I always pick up beans whenever we're here, because Mr. Weir likes me to keep them stocked. I thought we could catch a bite before we have to head back. They serve a nice lunch. Do you mind?”

He felt entirely foolish, but hid his humiliation behind an air of detachment. “No, no. I don't mind. A bite of lunch sounds great.”

That “certain coffee shop” turned out to be a place called “Dell's Coffee Bar & Beanery.” It was among a row of shops occupying the ground floor of an ancient looking four story brick building in a revitalized part of older London. It was dim inside, full of rich smells of coffee and tea and decorated with classic rock band memorabilia. A motley collection of thrift store tables and chairs occupied the center of the shop. The whole left wall was shelves and shelves laden with bins of coffee beans and tea and the wood counter looked like it might've once occupied a pub. Behind it was a bead-curtained doorway.

They seemed to be the first customers of the day as no one else was about.

Alerted to their entry by a door chime, a proprietor suddenly appeared through the beaded curtain. He looked as retro as his decor. His hair was long, gray and bound in a pony-tail and he wore a black leather vest over a faded black t-shirt that read, “I love rock n' roll” in equally faded red lettering.

“Hi, Ernie,” Sam greeted as they approached the counter.

“Ms. Hamblin,” he returned.

“I'll have my usual.”

Ernie nodded and turned inquiring eyes to Scott. Quickly scanning the black-board menu, Scott said, “I'll take the turkey wrap combo with a Kenyan green tea.”

Ernie nodded again, then vanished back through the bead curtain.

“You must come here a lot,” Scott casually observed as he genteelly ushered Sam ahead of him, allowing her to pick a table. She selected a small round one set against the far wall right under a framed poster of Iron Maiden's ghoulish mascot.

“I suppose you could say that,” she replied while removing her jacket to hang it on the back of her chair, revealing her curve hugging hot pink turtleneck sweater—a fact Scott generously allowed his eyes to linger on and appreciate rather than averting them as he normally had in the past.

He politely held her chair and seated her before removing his own coat and, likewise, hanging it on his chair-back. With his legs long and table small, when he sat, he found his knees against hers generating a pleasantly electric sensation.

“So, I take it Weir does a lot of business of overseas?” he quickly asked, trying to get his mind off it.

“Sometimes. It depends,” she replied.

“On what?”

She regarded him with shrewd amusement. “My, my, aren't we nosy. Why so much interest in Mr. Weir?”

“Just curious.”

Their conversation paused as a wisp of a girl with bleached-blond hair arrived with their food, placed it on the table, then quickly retreated. Scott bit into his wrap, then hungrily devoured it. He hadn't realized how hungry he was and was just lifting his tea cup his lips when he realized Sam's eyes were on him. The adoration he read there was impossible to miss and unnerving in it's intensity.

He hastily took a sip of tea, then quickly returned it to it's plate, nervously lacing his fingers around the cup. He cleared his throat. “We were discussing your boss's overseas business, I think.”

She waved that away. “Oh, he's boring. Let's talk about you.”

“I'm not that interesting.”

“Oh, I think you are,” she said, resting a hand on his sweater-covered forearm, the warmth of which burnt through to his skin like brand. “Would you believe you're all I've thought about since we first met?” she added.

He hesitated, like a man standing on the edge of a precipice, intoxicated by the danger, afraid of falling--yet *not* afraid.

“Come on,” she implored, squeezing his forearm. “I *really* want to know. Let's start with where you grew up.”

He felt like he was on sensory overload. “Unfortunately, I grew up in an orphanage,” he answered, giving in to her persistence.

Sam leaned forward with intense interest. “What happened?” she breathed.

“My parents died when I was about six. We were on an airplane, apparently being flown by my father, when it went down. I've been told I only survived because my parents put me a parachute and threw me out, but I don't remember. Whatever happened, it left me with a head-injury so severe I was comatose for a year.”

Her eyes brimmed with tender empathy. “Then what?”

“I don't remember anything before waking up in a hospital and it another year of therapy just to learn how to do normal stuff, like walking, again. It really put me behind educationally and that made things tough, but not as tough as they got when the headaches started. I was about fifteen and having these terrible, debilitating headaches. Thankfully someone had good sense to send me to a specialist in Washington D.C. He figured out ruby-quartz lenses relieved those headaches and, since I was out of the orphanage, I decided to stay out and never went back to Omaha.”

“And *no one* ever adopted you?”

She had both hands gripping his forearm now. He shook his head and moved on quickly before any of the bitterness he still felt about it could raise it's ugly head. “As it turned out, those headaches were only the beginning of a bigger problem. One day, when I was downtown, two laser beams just shot out from my eyes.” His tone dropped to a bare whisper as he re-lived the memory. “I nearly killed a hundred people that day. The beams knocked a huge construction crane off a sky-scraper and, though I destroyed it before it landed on anyone, the people still turned into a raging mob out to kill me. A guy grabbed me and got me out of there. I thought he was my friend, but really, he just wanted to use my new ability for his own criminal purposes. That's when Professor Xavier came along. He got me out of there and more or less finished raising me.” Scott fell into a reflective silence as he remembered his recent hardness of heart toward the man to

whom he owed so much..

“Well,” Sam said, leaning in further, her full sensuous lips tauntingly close. “You certainly turned out *very well* for all of that.” She peered gravely into his glasses. “And that's why you wear those, to control the beams.”

“The, uh, head injury damaged something so I can't turn them on and off,” he hastily replied.

“Wow, all that power,” she breathed. “You're *so* lucky.”

“I've never thought of myself as lucky.”

“Special then,” she murmured, reaching up one finger and tracing the line of his jaw.

He shuddered. He should've pulled back---but didn't. Those insidious words: “*You're thousands of miles from home, no one's gonna know,*” kept playing over and over in his mind like a skipping record.

“You don't know how I've longed to touch you,” Sam whispered, that finger reaching his chin. “That's the real reason I came to your cabin when we were flying back. I wanted to look at you, I wanted to dream about being with you and touching you...” At this point, hooking her fingers under his chin, she drew him toward her until their lips touched. It was light at first, quickly becoming feverish. Scott's blood suddenly felt like lava coursing through his veins and relished it. He felt so alive, so fresh. All the debilitating lethargy he'd been suffering since his return from Turkish prison just seemed to burn off, re-energizing him. He'd felt so empty for so long he'd forgotten how good it could feel to have a passion for something surging through his veins. It reminded him of his early days courting Jean...Jean! Her name came to him like a slap and he could visualize her face crystal clear in his mind, which worked as effectively as having ice water dumped on him. He broke off the kiss and jerked back away from Sam, appalled both at himself and what he was doing.

She regarded him with still smoldering eyes, her fingers playing enticingly along the back of his hairline. “Maybe you and I should go someplace more...private?” she whispered huskily.

Her touch made him shiver and the temptation was powerful. It took a force of will to shake his head. “I can't.”

“Not even for a little while?”

He shook his head again. “I love my wife.”

She caught his face between her hands, looking directly in the glasses with a light laugh. “Who said anything about love? Silly boy. I don't want to *keep* you, I just want to *borrow* you for a little while,” and planted another kiss on his lips, trying to re-engage him.

He broke it off again, though, and caught both her hands between his just to keep them out of any more mischief, then met her eyes firmly. “It's time we went back to the plane.”

She searched his glasses beseechingly. “Is that what you *really* want?”

“Yes,” he replied, standing resolutely and putting on his coat. He knew he couldn't afford the slightest hesitation. She was bewitching and he'd succumb if he did.

“Very well,” Sam relented, also standing. “*If* it's what you *really* want.” Collecting her jacket, she started toward the counter, then paused, casting one final appealing look over her shoulder at him, as if offering him that last chance to change his mind. It was an enchantingly compelling face, but he shook his head. So, with a brief look of disappointment, she continued on.

Scott used that moment to duck into the john. He splashed cold water on his face. A cold shower would've been better, but this would have to do. Raising his eyes to the mirror, he examined the stranger looking back with contempt, clearly a man too stupid to keep his guard up. Disgusted with himself, he dried his face and walked back out. That's when he really noticed the coffee shoppe had actually become quite busy since he and Sam had first arrived and realized with some chagrin that his little tryst with Sam had undoubtedly been observed. So, it was with no small humiliation that he crossed to room to the front door, where Sam was waiting for him with her shopping bag of coffee beans.

The drive back to the airport was quiet. Sam focused on driving and he feigned sleep. Unfortunately his conscience had no intention of letting him rest regardless of how tired it was. It was too busy whipping him with guilt. In part, his conscience was right. He should've known better. On the other hand, nothing had *actually* happened—nothing more than a kiss. So, no harm done, no foul and no one need be the wiser. He might've actually been able to leave it at that were it not for one final thought that drifted in, which blasted all such justifications out of the water: *Any man, who looks at a woman with lust has already committed adultery with her in his heart.* He didn't even know where it came from, but it made him wince, because it was true. He had done exactly *that*. He'd looked lustfully upon a woman who was not his wife. He'd betrayed

Jean, his vows---everything he believed in and it sickened him---but he couldn't tell her. He didn't dare. Jean had been cheated on by *both* her previous boyfriends and he'd *promised* her that she'd never have to deal with that with him. He'd convinced her that she would be able to count on *him* to be faithful. It was a matter on which Jean was extremely sensitive, so he knew perfectly well such details about whether it was just a kiss or not wouldn't matter to her. She'd feel cheated on, regardless, and kick him out. *That* had been her promise and he couldn't bear the thought of losing her. So, he spent the remainder of the drive back to Weir's jet trying to figure out how to make it up to her to assuage his guilt without ever admitting anything.

Once on the jet, he and Sam immediately parted ways. He to his seat and she to do whatever was required for flight preparations. As soon as jet had leveled off at altitude and being confident Sam was busy in the cockpit, Scott crept quietly through the galley and down to the rear cabin to change clothes. After that, to the nearest john in the aisle to shave. The goatee had to go. This was his first step in his plan for pleasing Jean and making things right. Looking back over the past weeks, he had to admit he'd been holding a grudge against her and everyone for not doing what he thought they should have for getting him out of Turkish prison quicker. Conceding that maybe things had gone the only way they could have and, if the shoe had been on the other foot, he may very well have made exactly the same decisions was a hard pill to swallow. Out of anger and bitterness he'd been foolishly punishing Jean, distancing himself from her, not even acting like a friend, much less a husband. He regarded his reflection with a sigh. Hard pill or not, that was going to change now. It had to. He would be better. He would be the husband he should've been all along and if doing so helped resolve his guilty conscience, then all the better. He splashed on fresh aftershave, then on his way back to the main cabin, grabbed water and a couple snack bars, dimmed the overhead lights and settled into his seat. He wanted to look like he was sleeping, so Sam wouldn't be tempted to speak to him, though the reality of sleep remained far away for the whole flight.

It was ten-thirty eastern time when the Weir's jet finally put down at Newboro International Airport. Scott collected his things, anticipating a final awkward moment of passing Sam as he got off the plane, but it was only Max who opened the hatch and bid him goodbye. So, Scott was greatly relieved as he hopped down the steps to the tarmac, then strode toward the terminal, expecting to find Jack there to pick him up.

However, it wasn't Jack waiting to pick him up---it was Jean. She had purposely asked Jack to let her be the one. Of course, he'd offered to come along, but she'd turned him down--not because she wouldn't have appreciated Jack's jovial company, but because she had no idea what sort of attitude Scott might arrive with and didn't want to be embarrassed in front of him by any erratic behavior on Scott's part. He'd not been fit company for anyone—even her for quite some time. Even so, here she was, the good wife come to pick up her husband. The Corporate Aviation Terminal lobby was a cushy affair, clearly designed for itinerant professionals judging by its up-scale decor, but at this late hour, the only available amenity was a self-serve snack-bar. The lobby was deserted except for her and a muted television running closed-captioned news. She was seated, waiting, staring bleakly into her paper vending machine coffee cup when she thought she heard her name called. Looking up, she saw Scott striding toward her. To her surprise he was smiling and clean-shaven, looking exactly like his old self. She rose, stepping toward him, full of uncertainty.

When they met, Scott dropped his duffel, took the paper coffee cup out of her hand and with swept her up with his other arm against him. “You're the only thing I've thought about for the past twelve hours,” he declared, then kissed her soundly.

When their lips finally parted, she found herself only able to blink in confusion at him with moist eyes. It seemed too good to be true—and his next words were music to her ears.

“I'm sorry, baby, for *everything*,” he said.

It was all a blur after that. Before Jean knew it they were out of the airport and down the road checked into fabulous hotel suite and joyfully in each others arms.

Five days passed they came home. It was mid-morning on Sunday when he and Jean returned to the school and so encountered no one on their way in. Scott's hands were laden with shopping bags that had doubled as luggage for Jean---mostly because she hadn't known to pack anything. It had been necessary to purchase a whole new wardrobe plus toiletries and make-up, which, in a huge departure from his normally frugal habits, Scott had readily done without complaint. More, he'd actually splurged and indulged her with all every extravagance: room service breakfast in bed every day, wining and dining her at night, champagne,

flowers, spa treatments---whatever she wanted. For her, the week had been a dream true, for him it had been about constantly staying up-beat and focused on her every pleasure in order to expunge his guilt.

Now he was trudging up the stairs---tired and anxious to be alone, because he had a little task to care of that he didn't want Jean to see.

“Is Ro in the house?” he carefully asked.

Jean regarded him with a questioning look.

“I thought you might like to show-off your new outfit.”

Jean's face lit up. “What a good idea,” she said. Then furrowed her brow slight, feeling for where her friend was. “She's in her room. I'll see you shortly,” she promised, then gave him a peck and tramped off up toward the stairs to the third floor eager to show off her all-white skirt-jacket ensemble and matching heels.

With a sigh of relief Scott hurried up the steps into their bedroom and dropped the shopping bags full of Jean's things on the bed, then dumped out his duffel. Assorted dirty clothing tumbled out as well as a particular roll of clothing he'd very carefully wrapped in a plastic shopping bag and had kept hidden all this time. It was the thing he didn't want Jean to see or even know about. It was the clothing he'd worn on that day at the coffee shop with Sam. Unwrapping it, he could still faintly smell the scent of coffee as well as Sam's spicy perfume, which immediately provoked a rush of sensations and memories he didn't want to remember---exactly why he didn't want Jean anywhere around when he opened it. She might sense his feelings about those memories---maybe even just read his face, leading to uncomfortable questions he didn't want to answer. Fortunately his tactical decision to create an environment of apparent openness with her by telling her all the details of his incarceration she longed to hear as well as his reasons for trading Jack to go with Trent to England---everything *except* what really happened between him and Sam. He re-wrapped the clothing, then tucked it away in the depths of the closet, figuring he'd find a chance sometime later to sneak it downtown to a cleaners. He closed the door with a sigh. It was like hiding a murdered body and being out of sight *wasn't* out of mind. He still felt guilty and his effort to make-up for it by this plan of pleasing Jean wasn't making it any better. He dumped the rest of their mutual laundry into the hamper, then hauled the bag containing Jean's toiletries and make-up into the bathroom and set it on the counter. Catching his reflection, he regarded himself gloomily. He was a guy stuck between a rock and a hard place. He had to either keep up the happy constantly pleasing act so he wouldn't feel the guilt and she wouldn't sense it or risk everything by telling her the truth. Neither was an especially appealing choice.

“*What we need,*” he confided to his reflection, “*is another way out, a third option. Something in the middle, something that will let us live with ourselves and keep Jean.*”

Unfortunately, his reflection wasn't forthcoming with any brilliant ideas.

From the outer room he suddenly heard his wife's light step, then her dulcet voice calling, “Oh, Scott honey, where are you?”

He put on a smile and his reflection smiled back. “Just putting your things away,” he cheerily replied as he went to meet her.

The next morning, right after breakfast to Jean, Scott retreated to his classroom, which seemed the only place he could legitimately excuse himself to without raising any questions from her. His plan to keep Jean deliciously happy with all his constant little attentions, flirtations and thoughtfulness's might be succeeding, but it was wearing him out. He desperately needed some time alone and this was the best place. His room was one of three classrooms in the East corridor opposite Ro's conservatory that, in the mansion's hey-day, had been servants quarters. It was filled with twenty modern student desks arranged in four rows of five each facing his wooden desk at the front of the room. Behind his desk to either side were a pair of free-standing dry erase boards. On one “Mr. Drake” was still scrawled and he regarded it with bitterness, reminded of Jean's heavy praise for how well Bobby Drake had “replaced him” and “how successful he'd been as a teacher.” That he could be so easily and successfully replaced by a mere student galled Scott's already sour mood enough that he quickly erased it to get it out of his sight. Then, sitting at his desk, he opened his laptop computer, the same one he'd left for Bobby to use, since it contained everything pertinent to his math class. He pulled up the lesson plan, intending to take over the exam review scheduled for today, but what he found just irked him all the more. *Bobby had changed his lesson plan!* Lesson blocks across every level had been deleted! “*No wonder Mr. Drake had been doing so well,*” Scott thought, “*He cheated.*” He'd shortened the agenda, which now meant Scott's original test format no longer matched the curriculum! He was going to

have to rewrite the whole thing, so Scott very angrily pulled up the master test file in order to work on it. Like he didn't have enough problems in his life to contend with already.

It was about an hour later when a familiar voice made Scott raise his eyes from the computer screen.

"Hey, Mr. Summers, you're back!"

It was Bobby Drake.

Scott glanced at the time. It was about ten minutes till nine. Soon students would be flowing into the room.

Bobby smilingly shambled into the room, coming to right to his desk, his eyes taking in what Scott was doing with puzzled curiosity. "I didn't know you were going to be here today."

Skipping any pleasantries, Scott went right to the point. "I see you made quite a few changes to my lesson plan."

Bobby's smile faded. "Well, actually..." he began.

Scott cut him off. "I thought I made my instructions clear."

"Uh, yes sir..."

"What did I say?"

"Just to use your lesson plan, but then..."

"No buts. This is *my* class. I wanted things handled in a certain way for specific reasons and I entrusted you to do that."

"But things happened and you didn't come back," Bobby defended, "so the responsibility to do what was best for the class fell on me." His tone turned sarcastic. "Sorry if that wasn't good enough."

"Don't take that tone with me," Scott warned sharply. "What you did was just make a bunch of work for me, since all *my* tests were designed to match *my* lesson plan, and now *I* have to revise them."

Glaring down on Scott, Bobby seemed about to reply, then apparently thought better of it. Instead he abruptly whirled around and stalked out of the room, brusquely passing incoming students, causing a stir of curious whispers.

"Please take your seats," Scott commanded blandly as he opened the attendance file and judiciously placed a check into absent column next to Bobby's name.

An hour later, when the students were beginning to file out of the room, Scott was surprised to notice Jack standing in the doorway. He traded pleasantries with passing students until all of them were out of the room before sauntering in himself and take a seat in one of the desks directly in front of Scott's, an action Scott observed warily since it wasn't Jack's custom to skip out on his own gym class.

Jack laced his fingers together on the desk top. "What's up?" he asked with his usual easy-going smile, though his steely blue eyes were deadly serious.

"Don't you have a class?" Scott asked.

"Mom and Logan can handle it," Jack replied. "So, how'd things go getting Boland to England?"

Scott regarded him narrowly, "Hunky-dory. Why are you here?"

"Funny you should ask."

Scott doubted it was funny at all.

"I was just talking with Bobby," Jack went on.

So, that was it. Bobby had taken his case to good-guy Jack.

"Something about you not liking what he did with the lesson plan," Jack rambled on.

"He made unauthorized changes."

"Well, actually, I authorized them."

Scott stared at Jack, flabbergasted. "What?"

"Well, you didn't come back..."

"So everyone keeps reminding me," Scott observed dryly.

"Someone had to be in charge and since Drake wanted to continue being your sub, the Professor made me his adviser. One day Drake came to me with a good question. He said some of the kids weren't getting the blocks they were in and he thought it'd help them to slow things down a bit so he could work with them more by cutting out some of the other lesson blocks. Sounded good to me, so I ok'd it and helped him pick what to skip. What's the big deal?"

"What's the big deal?" Scott repeated, greatly annoyed. "The big deal is now I have to revise *all* the tests."

"I don't see why you should," Jack replied simply. "Bobby wrote his own."

"I *have* tests," Scott sputtered.

"But they don't match the lesson plan anymore, right?"

"Well, he could've just told me," Scott retorted defensively, irritated to be proved wrong.

"How about this?" Jack countered. "How about we just let Drake finish what he started? Let's let him run the exam review and use his own tests. What do you say?"

Scott tapped his pen impatiently against the desk. He didn't want to. It was his job and he needed it back because he needed someplace to be so he didn't have to play Mr. Happy all the time with Jean. If he lost his classroom, he'd have nowhere. "I'll... consider it," he finally answered, mostly to put Jack off.

"Considering Bobby's kept up with all your work plus his own," Jack persisted. "I think he's earned the right."

Scott glowered at him. Normally, Jack was one of his favorite people, but right now he just wanted him out of his face and he certainly *didn't* need any more guilt added to his pile. "And I *said* I'd consider it," he repeated, an edge of anger in tone.

Jack just sat there a long moment contemplating him with a concerned look before finally giving a nod and standing. He walked to the door, but on the threshold, turned back. "Listen, Scott," he said, "if you need to talk, I'm here for you. We all are. Me, Mom, Ro, the Professor--even Logan if you catch him right. That'd be better than taking stuff out on the kids, you know." Then, with a mock salute, walked out the door and out of sight.

Scott threw down his pen in disgust and leaned back in his chair to stare frustratedly at the ceiling. Here he was, probably in the worse spot in his life with his own problems and Jack was asking him to help Bobby out? He couldn't even help himself. He sighed, wishing deeply he could talk to someone about what to do to fix things with Jean. However, options for who to confide in seemed limited. Certainly not Jack. He was a war-hero and Scott didn't want Jack thinking less of him. Besides, Jack wasn't married, so what would he know. Ro was out, too, because she was Jean's best friend. Andi and the Professor were also out because he was too ashamed to admit it to either. Plus, he already knew what they'd say and telling the truth wasn't what he wanted to hear. He wanted that magical third option that was neither truth nor a lie, but would still relieve him of this burden of guilt *without* sacrificing Jean. That only left Logan. Though it made him cringe to even think of confiding in Logan, Logan *was* married and also came with a lengthy pedigree of past womanizing. Surely of all people, he might have something useful to say. The problem was how to get that useful info out of Logan without incriminating himself. There was no way he wanted Logan to know the *actual* details. He'd never let him live it down. Something Jack just said came to mind, something about "catching Logan just right." That got Scott to thinking. How exactly might one go about catching Logan "just right?"

It proved easier than he expected.

He realized his opportunity was at hand a day later when at lunch he over heard Logan casually telling Andi he was planning on changing the Firebird's oil after shop class. So that's where Scott went, to the garage after shop class was over. Loud strains of AC/DC greeted his eardrums as he walked in and down the wooden wheel chair ramp. He could see Logan had already driven the car up onto the metal ramps and was readying his oil-change equipment so it would be in easy reach once he was under the car.

"Jean tired of you?" Logan threw back sarcastically without even a look.

"I don't know how you could even tell it was me over that racket," Scott quipped back, deliberately turning down the volume on the old disc player.

"I smelled ya," Logan groused, rolling the dolly in place first with his foot, then sprawling himself on it, added, "Either be useful or go away," and rolled under the engine compartment until only his lower legs were visible.

Scott pushed oil catch-pan under the car with his toe. "I have a hypothetical question for you," he offered conversationally.

"Don't like hypothetical questions," Logan's disembodied voice grunted.

"Oh, come on. Humor me. Let's say, *hypothetically*, you were somewhere and a woman came on to you. What would you do?"

"That depends."

"On what?"

"On what she looks like, hypothetically."

“Well...let's say drop-dead gorgeous.”

“And she comes on to me?”

“Uh-huh.”

“In what way? Hypothetically.”

“A kiss.”

“That's it?”

“Well...yes.”

Logan snorted. “That's why I hate hypothetical questions. They're not realistic.”

“Does that mean you wouldn't kiss her back?”

“If I was gonna be kissin' any passing skirt that came around, bub, I wouldn't have tied the knot.”

Scott felt his ears burn. “So, you wouldn't even be tempted?”

“This is a lame conversation.”

He knew was losing Logan. “Well, just for arguments sake,” Scott persisted, trying to savage the moment by shifting the question around, “let's say you *did* kiss some girl who came on to you and now you want to tell Andi. What would you do?”

“Have you lost your screws? What'd they do to you in that prison anyway?”

“It's, uh, for a research paper for an on-line course I've decided to take,” Scott quickly lied, hardly able to believe the words fell so easily from his lips--but he was desperate.

“Research paper,” Logan repeated gruffly. “On what? Sex and lies?”

“Something like that.”

There was a long pause before finally Logan drawled out a reply. “Well, I'll tell you what. I hope I'd never be so stupid, but *if* I were, and that's a *really* big if, I sure wouldn't want her finding out by accident. I'd probably finesse it around, you know, play it so it didn't sound like I was the one who did anythin'.”

“Thanks, I'll make note a note of it,” Scott replied and quickly left, satisfied he had his answer. He'd just soft-sell himself to Jean as the hapless victim of Sam's advances. It was so simple he didn't know why he hadn't thought of it himself. Now it was just a matter of working out the details. That same night was Jean's night for being “house-mom” and, naturally, she wanted him with her, but it was easy enough to escape away to set the stage for his plan simply by suggesting he would have “something special waiting for her upstairs” when she was done.

So it was. After all the children were in their rooms and the downstairs lights were off, Jean's heart was beating with a thrill of anticipation as she ascended the stair and walked toward their room. Upon opening the door, she was immediately greeted by the glow of candles. They were everywhere and Scott was seated on the loveseat smiling, a clear goblet with some wine still in it was in his hand. He beckoned her to join him, patting the loveseat, which she eagerly did, kicking off her heels, then settling onto the love-seat, her eyes taking in the tray of fruit and cheese arranged neatly on a tray on the small coffee table with pleasure. He'd done something very similar their first night together.

“This is so sweet of you, Scott.”

He offered her a wine goblet. “Wine?”

She nodded as she grasped it by the stem and watched Scott as he filled it with white wine. “What shall we drink to?” she asked warmly.

He refilled his own—which happened to be his *third* and he was feeling it. “How about to love and understanding?”

“To love and understanding,” she repeated, crossing her wrist with his and sipping, then she helped herself to cheese and fruit while they discussed the days sundry events. She extended her empty glass to Scott to refill with sultry gaze.

“A really funny thing happened while I was taking Boland to England,” Scott chuckled as he tumbled more wine into her glass. “It was the weirdest thing. You wouldn't believe it.”

Jean was intrigued. “Oh?”

“You remember Weir's pilot?”

“Which one?”

“The girl.”

“She was his co-pilot, I think.”

“I guess a bunch of other things, too. Chauffeur, body guard, attache, whatever he needs.”

Jean swirled her wine thoughtfully. She remembered Sam Hamblin quite clearly. The woman had slut written all over her. “I’m sure Mr. Weir appreciates her, ah, diversity.”

“Would you believe she actually made a pass at me?” he chuckled. “Crazy, huh?”

“Oh, she did, did she?” Jean replied, somewhat skeptically. She didn’t remember this detail from his earlier accounting of events to and from England with Trent Boland. She regarded him narrowly. “When did this happen?”

“Oh, while we were in England. It doesn’t really matter. What matters is I just wanted you to know she tried, that’s all.”

At this point Jean set her goblet aside on the coffee table. “You didn’t you mention this before.”

“Well, I didn’t want to spoil our time together with something so unimportant,” he explained, then offered her a charming, if not somewhat wine inebriated smile. “And what a great time that was...breakfast in bed every morning, champagne dinners.” Encircling her shoulders with an arm, he puckered up for a kiss.

Jean could feel her inner alarms sounding. Perhaps if she hadn’t *seen* Sam it would be a different. There was also the fact that Scott had adamantly insisting on going on that trip alone. Was something going on between them? She had to know and, driven by jealousy, did at that moment the very thing she’d always sworn she would never do---in a facade of affection she placed her hand on the back of Scott’s head and skimmed his memories. It was easy and only took her a fraction of a second to discover every touch, every kiss and every lust. It made her snatch her hand back in revulsion. “How could you!” she spat, backing rapidly off the love seat and coming to her feet. “You lying traitor, you actually kissed that little hussy!” she stormed.

“You read my mind?” Scott challenged back, snapping to his feet as well. “You’re not supposed to do that!”

“And *you’re* not supposed to commit adultery, so I guess we’re even.” She pointed toward the door, making it swing open. “Get out, now! I don’t want to even look at you!”

“Jean, let me explain...”

“Explain?” she repeated mockingly. “I saw it all in your head. What’s left to explain?”

“What I *thought about* and what I *did* are two different things.”

With the barest flick of Jean’s finger his bureau drawers shot open and underwear and shirts began sailing through the air past him out into the hallway. “I *said* get out!” she ordered through gritted teeth.

“Jean, if you’d just give me a second chance, just trust me...”

“Trust you!” she seethed. “What’s makes you think I’ll ever trust you again?”

Pillows on the loveseat suddenly launched magically into the air and began pummeling him about the head and shoulders, driving him backwards out the doorway and into the hall.

“Don’t Jean...” he protested, trying to protect himself from the fluffy assault with his arms. “Listen, nothing really happened...” Too late, the door slammed shut in his face.

Scott stared at it dejectedly, standing in a sea of briefs and polo shirts piled around his feet. So, much for finesse. He tried the doorknob. Locked. He pressed his face close to the door-jam. “Jean, please let me back in,” he pleaded, but only got the dull thump of something striking the door in reply.

He noticed murmurs coming from the other end of the hallway and looked. Curious heads were poking out of doorways trying to see what was going on. “Back to bed!” he barked, making every head snap out of sight.

The door abruptly opened and a heap of more clothing to come hurling out on top him, then it slammed smartly shut again. Pushing it off his head to the floor, Scott saw with dismay that it was all the outfits and lingerie he’d purchased Jean over the past five days they’d been at the hotel. It wasn’t a good sign.

From behind him, a Cajun voice unexpectedly offered counsel. “Dey women, dey get over it, ami.”

Startled, Scott whipped around to see a sleepy-looking Gambit clad in a pair of nylon sports shorts and white wife-beater t-shirt.

“Mind your own business,” Scott grumbled, hurriedly scooping all Jean’s things up, then scuttling down the hallway toward another room.

“But you need help, ami,” Gambit replied, following him, obligingly picking up whatever fell out of Scott’s armload.

Unfortunately, holding onto the mound of clothing retracted Scott’s ability to reach the door knob.

Gambit opened it for him. “Dis dings, dey blow over eventually,” he philosophically observed. “Gambit know. He married once.”

Scott just threw the clothing on the floor to one side and firmly shut the door on Gambit. He hadn't even had time to decide what he was going to do next when there came a light knock. He flung it open only to see a red demi-bra dangling at eye level from Gambit's fingers. “You forget dis,” the Cajun said..

Scott snatched it. “Go back to bed,” he ordered, closing the door on him yet again.

Finally alone, he tossed the bra aside onto the clothing pile, then just flopped on his back on the bed in the dark and lay there staring wretchedly at the ceiling. He'd lost Jean. In one fell swoop the one person he cared about most in this world was gone. It was over. She'd be true to her promise and would have nothing more to do with him. He knew that for sure and it couldn't be undone. She'd read his thoughts and seen the truth. No amount of words would undo that. He didn't even know what he was going to do with himself now. He couldn't imagine going on, living and working here seeing her all day long, then going to bed alone, always together, yet always apart. It would be torture. He'd have to leave, but where would he go? The fact was he had no where else. This was the only home he'd ever known and he had a purpose here, a mission, an identity. If he left, he'd lose all of that and, if he stayed---daily perdition. All the guilt and remorse and regret he'd been shoving out of the way and ignoring suddenly consumed him, beating him up. It was his own fault. He'd made this mess and there was no way out. Hopelessness filled him and along with it came depression. It crept into his mind, telling him how unlucky he'd always been and how he was never going to have anything better. Then, suddenly a flashback---like he was back in that horrible, moldy-smelling shower room in Turkish prison. He could even smell the sweaty stench of the two guards holding him pinned on that bench. He remembered laying there, expecting his trousers to be split any second and remembered doing something he hadn't done in years—he'd prayed. As a kid he'd prayed and prayed, but, when nothing he felt he needed happened, he'd given up. However, while pinned and desperate, he'd called on God to save him, even sweetening the deal with a promise of speaking to Him regularly again---if He'd just help. Amazingly it was right after that the guards radio had gone off, calling their attention elsewhere and saving him from anything worse. “*You can't call that saving,*” he threw up at heaven. “*They stuck me in a hole and I'd probably still be there if Andi hadn't shown up.*” Though, obviously the Andi's timely arrival had been the very thing that had made them pull him out of that hole and put him back in his cell.. “*It still took longer then I wanted,*” he complained. It was at this point he suddenly remembered the Professor lecturing him on not making vows to God he couldn't keep. Vows ought be either kept, the Professor had said, or not made at all---and Scott realized he hadn't kept his end of the bargain. Whether he liked how he was rescued or not, a deal was still a deal. So, reluctantly, Scott heaved himself off the bed and went downstairs.

It wasn't like he had anything left to lose.

So, shrugging into his jacket, he went out the gym-side exit and followed the snow-edged stone path around to the old gardener's quarters that Xavier had so many years ago converted into a chapel. Since it was designed for personal solace and reflection, it was never locked. Entering, Scott switched on the overhead lights, then looked around. It had twelve pews in all, six on either side of an central aisle facing a large stained glass window depicting a winged archangel. The surrounding walls were decorated with a myriad of paintings, tapestries and plaques depicting more angels. He remembered marrying Jean here, which only served to remind him how badly he'd failed to keep his pledge to honor her above all others. Walking dejectedly down the aisle, he sat in the second pew from the front on the left side, then peered around, wondering what to do next. Studying the stained glass window, his eyes landed on the scroll of banner beneath the angel's feet that read, “*For He will give His angels charge over thee. Psalm 91:11.*” It seemed as good as any place to start, so he pulled a Bible from the rack in front of him and located the passage.

He had no idea what he was doing and only intended to read that one verse, but it hooked his attention and he quickly found himself reading the rest of the passage. However it was verse fifteen that caught his attention, which read: “*He will call upon Me and I will answer, I will be with him in trouble, I will rescue him and honor him.*” To Scott's amazement the words seemed to leap off the page at him like a shout, a call seeming to reach to into the very depths of his soul. A light of understanding suddenly blinked on, he could see that he was his own worst enemy. It was his pride that had gotten into all this trouble, his sheer refusal to accept anyone else as being more right than him. He also saw how egotistically and self-righteously he'd assumed himself above crossing the moral line and how equally egotistical it had been to even imagine he could make himself look innocent in the matter. He wasn't. He'd chosen to relish Sam's attentions out of the

pure vanity of being attractive to a beautiful older woman. He hung his head in deep regret, his folly glaringly apparent. His life was a mess—a mess he couldn't fix and this verse was calling to him to consider looking higher, to Someone who possibly could. So, bowing his head, Scott admitted his mistakes, admitted he was in trouble and humbly asked for what this passage was offering: rescue. Rescue and a new life and a second chance.

Andi raised her head to squint at the red digits of the clock at the loud ring of the phone. It was nearly eleven-thirty. She glanced at the caller ID, recognized the Jean and Scott's number and picked up. "Hello?"

"Andi?" Jean said, her voice sounding cracked from crying.

Andi sat up alertly, able to tell Jean was upset. "What's wrong?"

"I know it's late," Jean said, "but I really need to see you."

Logan flopped over. "Who is it?" he rumbled..

Andi ignored him. "What's happened?" she asked into the phone.

"I'd rather tell you in person."

"Alright, come over," Andi replied. "I'll see you when you get here." She hung up and slipped out from the covers.

"Who is it?" Logan repeated. "And what's going on?"

"It was Jean," Andi replied, quickly pulling on jeans and a sweatshirt. "And I don't know what's going on, but she wants to come over here to tell me."

"Now?"

"It must be bad. She sounds pretty upset."

"Ha," Logan snorted. "Probably some stupid fight," he grumbled as he rolled over. "I don't see why those two have to make you the center of all their problems..." but Andi didn't hear. She was already out the door and headed downstairs.

Jean arrived about twenty minutes later and it was obvious by her smeary mascara and splotchy face she'd been crying. She threw herself sobbing into Andi's arms as soon as she opened the door, forcing Andi to have to shove it closed with her toe. She patted Jean's back and just held her until she calmed down, then was able to guide her to the sofa. Andi handed her a box of tissue as they sat down. "Now tell me what's going on."

"Scott's been unfaithful," Jean choked out.

Andi was taken aback. "He's slept with someone!"

"He kissed someone."

"What? Who?"

"Weir's tramp pilot, that's who. On that trip to England. I knew I should've gone with him," she wailed, burying her face in her hands to sob afresh.

Andi nodded. She knew from Jack that Scott had requested the switch for that trip, but had to wait for Jean's sobbing to ebb again before she probe further. "How do you know?"

Jean dabbed her eyes, but wouldn't meet Andi's. "Scott told me. He tried telling me some story about Sam making a pass at him, but the details didn't add up, so I got suspicious and I...I read his mind...just a little."

Andi regarded her disapprovingly, though clearly what was done, was done. "Alright, tell me the whole story," Andi said.

Jean looked at her now, eyes sparking with indignation. "That rat kissed the little whore in a public place, that's what," she fumed.

"Just a kiss?"

"Oh, he *wanted* more, believe me," Jean hissed venomously, her anger vibes causing some of the surrounding furniture to vibrate.

Andi placed a hand gently over Jean's. "Calm yourself. We don't want to bring down the house—or Logan." The vibrating immediately stopped and Andi removed her hand. "So they kissed, then what?" she asked.

"Wasn't kissing her bad enough?" Jean grumbled.

"That's all it was then, just a kiss," Andi surmised.

Jean just averted her eyes.

"What is it you really want, Jean?" Andi asked simply.

Jean looked at her in surprise. "What do you mean?"

“Well, do you just want vindication and to call it quits? Or do you love Scott enough to do whatever it takes to keep this marriage?”

Jean propped an elbow against the sofa and leaned her forehead wearily into her hand. “Right now, I just don't know. I'm feeling so hurt and angry I can't even think straight.”

“Why did Scott even tell you? Do you think it was just to hurt you?”

Jean squeezed her eyes shut, trying to think. “I don't know. I just went crazy at the kissing part and...the all feelings I saw in his mind...” her voice just faded off.

Andi was afraid she was going to lose her in another round of sobbing. “So, Sam and Scott kissed, Then what?” she asked quickly.

Jean just shook her head against her palm. “I don't know, I don't know,” she moaned.

“It sounds to me like you need to gather all your facts before you start making any rash decisions.”

Jean groaned, then after a moment straightened. “Do you think I should forgive him?” she asked tentatively, looking at the Kleenex she was twisting in her hands.

“I can't tell you what to do, but I will tell you what I believe,” Andi carefully answered. “I believe love *can* cover a multitude of transgressions. It's not the easiest choice, but I do think it's the most worthwhile.”

Jean sighed. “I'll think about it.” She glanced at her watch. “I suppose I've kept you long enough,” and stood up. Andi walked her to the door, where Jean paused. “Would you mind keeping this between you and me?” she asked.

“Of course,” Andi responded, then after a hug, sent Jean out the door.

“Save the world?” Logan mumbled sleepily as she slipped back into the bed beside him.

“Hopefully,” Andi replied, though only time would tell. She could only hope she given Jean some things to consider before making any rash decisions.

Scott was still in the chapel quietly reading that Bible. He'd become so engrossed he'd lost track of time. He'd skipped here and there in it, finally arriving in the New Testament, had been reading through the gospels, drinking it in, like a man who'd been lost in the desert suddenly finding water. He knew he'd just rounded some turn in his life and was now on a new path. He was new, though he couldn't have explained exactly how to anyone. He just knew and he also knew things were going to be different for him from now on.

Behind him he heard the faint sound to the chapel door opening and closing. Glancing over his shoulder he was surprised to see it was Jean and his heart skipped a beat. Carefully closing the book, he put it back in the rack, making a mental note to retrieve it later, and sent a heartfelt thanks heavenward for this opportunity. He'd prayed for a second chance with Jean and hoped this was it. Rising quickly, he stepped into the aisle. He read fierce determination in Jean's expression as he walked toward her, but in her eyes recognized a woundedness he alone was responsible for. He knew fate of their future together rested in what they were each about to say.

She was practically shaking with the intensity of her emotion as they came face to face and she aimed a pointing finger at him “I have some questions and you'd better have answers and I want the truth.”

He inclined his head as he clasped his hands behind him, a myriad angels on the walls around them silently observing this supreme moment.

“Did you fly with Trent just to be with Sam?” she asked sharply.

“No. My reasons for going were what I told you while we were at the hotel. It was about me resolving my own fears and me needing to prove to myself that I could fly overseas and complete a mission without getting arrested. Sam just happened to be on the plane.”

She regarded him narrowly. “Then why did this thing with Sam even happen?”

He took a deep breath. “Because I'm an idiot who let an beautiful older woman's flattery go to his head instead of keeping his guard up.”

“And you kissed her.”

“I *gave in* to *her* kissing me,” he corrected, “and I'm very, *very* sorry I did.” He was gratified to observe just the slightest softening in her face.

“Then what happened?”

“I remembered who it is I *really* love and I stopped the kissing and asked to be taken back to the plane. That was it. I never saw her again the rest of the flight.”

He could see her weighing this out, and he waited, both hopeful yet afraid, knowing her verdict could go either way.

*To be continued in "Ties That Bind."*