

Somewhat Simple by jenn

Summary: Logan has to figure out what to do with the girl he's picked up.

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{Five Years Earlier}

She looked like she'd fall apart if he let her go, so he kept his grip on her arm as they approached the house. Her cloak hood was pulled up to almost conceal her face from view, though he could see, even in the dark, the rather blank, fixed stare of her eyes. He got the distinct impression that if he hadn't been practically dragging her, she would still be standing out in the snow, staring at the burned remains of the camper.

Fuck, fuck, fuck, this was **not** what he'd had in mind for today.

It wasn't enough that he had to get caught out in a bar in Laughlin. No, of course not. When his luck went bad, it went fucking bad. It wasn't enough that he lost the camper. It wasn't enough that he was attacked and God knew, this time he hadn't even known why. It wasn't even enough that he'd stolen a car--though strictly speaking, that had been kinda fun. Now he was dragging around a sixteen-seventeen-whatever year old kid with no clue what the hell to do with her. Except leaving her wasn't an option and he was working to keep from figuring out why.

"Relax." God, he hoped he wasn't growling--he knew the signs of shock when he saw them and had no idea what he'd do if she collapsed now. Little girls were a mystery that he'd spent all his known life avoiding. Marie nodded jerkily--the hood moved in a vaguely rhythmic fashion, anyway, so close enough--and he let out a breath. Shit. What the fuck was he supposed to do with her? Staring at the house, he reviewed what little he'd been able to come up with in the space of a frantic three hour drive.

This was option one. And fuck him if he had an option two.

{God, Jamie, be home.}

He pounded on the door with one gloved hand, hard enough to get Marie's startled attention, and she started to back away. Shit. Without stopping, he jerked her back, not quite comfortable having her more than a few inches from him yet, especially exposed like this. Whoever the hell had attacked them was licking his wounds, yeah, but Logan, paranoid by nature, didn't want to take any chances. She shivered and he turned a quick glance down at her.

"God, kid, what the hell do ya think I'm gonna do to you?"

{Good question, kiddo. Jump into my camper and then worry when I take you to a house in the middle of nowhere.} How she'd survived this long was a mystery, deadly skin or not.

Mutely, she shook her head and took a step closer, then slid half-behind him, a shield between her and the door. A light brush of her hair against the back of his neck when she lifted on her toes to glance over his shoulder, then quickly back down.

Sixteen-seventeen-way too fucking young to be on her own, no question.

"Trust me." Though something in him just sat down in utter shock that he was telling someone that and actually meaning it.

A little sound that could have been a laugh or a sob emerged from behind him.

"I don't have much of a choice, now do I?" Slightly mocking, of herself, of her situation, maybe of her life at this point, and he really couldn't blame her for that. Then a soft sigh. "I'm sorry. I know I'm causin' you trouble--"

"You certainly are. Shoulda left you on the side of the road in the first place." Though something in him chilled at what she would have faced alone--whoever the fucker had been who attacked her--or him, he still wasn't sure. Whoever the hell had caused this entire fucking mess--that guy was on Logan's shit-list big time. Right at the top, slice and dice the bastard into two inch strips he'd use for fucking confetti.

"Marie--"

Soft sounds from inside interrupted what he was about to say and he paused, feeling her fingers come up to take a grip on the edge of his jacket. Closing his eyes briefly, he took in the soft rustle of a robe being put on, bare feet pounding against carpet-covered wood, soft muttering that made him grin a little despite himself.

Of all the things he could have imagined he'd be doing, he'd never thought he'd be coming back here anytime soon. And he guessed she'd be thinking the same thing.

"Who the fuck--" the door opened and a tousled blonde head emerged, and Logan looked into startled green eyes. Gorgeous eyes, he'd thought so the first time he saw her, eyes that touched something unremembered from his past. They widened, taking him in. "**Logan?**" Her voice was barely a whisper.

"In the flesh, darlin'."

There were two possible receptions he could get, depending on her mood--luckily, terry-cloth covered arms latched themselves around his neck and very soft, very clinging lips were on his, and he wrapped an arm around her, lifting her from her feet. Nice--his day was getting better by the second.

And a soft grunt behind him reminded him, unfortunately, that the fun stuff would have to wait.

"Jamie," he said, setting her down with some regret. Her arms lingered and one hand slid against his neck as she withdrew to stand in the doorway, looking up at him with an interesting cross between surprise and pleasure, arms wrapped around herself against the cold.

"Didn't think I'd see ya for awhile," she said softly, then shook her head. "Whatcha doin' in these parts, baby?"

Jamie wasn't beautiful. But he'd liked her the first time he met her--she was one of the few he'd kept any sort of contact with since meeting her in a bar in Atlantic City, where she'd been one of the most expensive hookers he'd ever fucked. Got him out of a nasty situation and to her apartment, where she'd been remarkably blase about the knowledge he was a mutant. Which, he speculated, in her line of work, probably wasn't that unusual. They'd left town together and she'd come with him as far as Calgary, where she found her True Calling, as she called it, and bought this nice piece of out of the way property.

Very out of the way. Not a decent road in sight, and he knew she liked it that way. And the remoteness was growing on him by leaps and bounds.

"Got a little problem." Carefully, he pried the reluctant Marie out from behind him and

Jamie's eyes widened a little. "This is Rogue. Rogue, Jamie."

Green eyes narrowed thoughtfully as she studied the girl, then came up to meet his. Suspicious. {Shit, Jamie, give me some credit here.}

"She's a little young--"

"It ain't like that." Though he sighed to himself, remembering the girl in Winnipeg who'd been literally on the right edge of legal. Apparently, she remembered too, from the narrow look. "Look, can we come in or not? She's gettin' cold." Though he suspected that Marie's shivering had less to do with the cold than with fear--post reaction stress. A second of hesitation, then Jamie stepped back, eyes fixed on the girl. Softening a little, and he blew out a breath. Maternal instincts. Let 'em work in his favor. Or in Marie's, anyway.

"Come on in."

The comfortable warmth and relative security of the house surrounded him and Logan began to feel himself relax. He took off his jacket once inside and turned Marie around--shock definitely, and she wasn't going to last much longer, the fear scent on her was beginning to make him dizzy. Carefully, he disattached her grip from the edge of his jacket, dropping it on a chair, then untied her wet cloak, trying to figure out what to do if she collapsed right now.

He was never meant to handle adolescent girls, no sir.

"Rogue?" Jamie said softly, and Marie's eyes flew to see Jamie close behind her back. Instantly, and Logan knew he'd never seen anyone move so fast, Marie was behind him, one arm slightly outstretched against Jamie's hands. Jamie stared up at him and he read the startled questions in her eyes.

"We had some trouble," he said shortly. "I'll explain later. She--"

"Needs to rest." Whatever she wanted to ask, it'd wait. Thank God. "Come here, honey--I'm not gonna hurt you, okay?" Gentle voice, soothing, soft. Trying to appear as non-threatening as possible.

He was getting used to prying Marie out--he wondered if that should bother him. Looking down into the frightened eyes, he tried a smile--tried to remember how one worked--and hoped for the best.

"Rogue, go with Jamie." A little shake of her shoulders that he hoped would startle her out of wherever her blank expression was locking her in her memories. "You're safe here, okay? Trust me. Jamie--" he paused, trying to find a way to explain Marie's condition, then failed and sighed to himself. This was getting fucking annoying, that's what. He settled for the simple. "She doesn't like to be touched."

Jade eyes widened again but she nodded, apparently willing to leave it there for now. Reluctantly, Marie freed his shirt and, at his sharp nod, slowly followed Jamie to the stairs. Then spun, suddenly, the cloak flying around her, hood falling to her shoulders. Looking at him with huge, terrified eyes.

"You'll stay, right?" And it must have taken a lot out of her to ask, and he knew that feeling, knew what she'd dropped in pride to say it. He nodded slowly and he could smell her relax and follow Jamie with a little more enthusiasm.

Not much, but a little.

It was ten minutes before Jamie met him in the kitchen, where he'd already availed himself of her refrigerator. Perched herself on a stool, looked right at him, hands flat on the table. Her no-bullshit look. Very Jamie.

"Who is she?"

Fair question.

"A runaway." Her eyebrows arched. "Yeah, below age, and yeah, I know what the fuck I'm doing, and no, I'm not fucking her. You should know better than that."

A slight hint of a smile. Damn, she should. He wasn't in the habit of screwing around with kids, Winnipeg being the completely unwitting exception.

"I do know better than that. What's her story?"

He paused and took a bite, trying to consider a way to broach the problem.

"She's a mutant, ain't she?" she said bluntly. Jamie was a smart girl. He'd always known that.

"Yeah."

"No touch has somethin' to do with it?"

He nodded again.

"All right. Why's she with you?"

Toughie. Jamie knew him too well. He took a breath, considering how he'd answer, knowing Jamie as well as he did.

"Picked her up in Laughlin." Considered how he'd phrase this. "We were attacked--someone wants one of us and didn't really seem to care what condition we were in when they got us." Another pause. "I needed somewhere to go until I could figure out what the hell to do with her. I can't just leave her on the side of the road." Though he almost had. Fuck it, he had almost left her, and that would probably haunt him for awhile. Logan stared down at the plate for a moment, regaining his careful detachment, wondering where the hell it had gone in the first place. Like he needed more nightmares. Like he wanted the responsibility of those dark eyes that looked at him like he was the Second Coming.

The memory came suddenly, the way she'd looked at him when he pulled her from that burning camper, the grip of gloved fingers on his arms, the way those arms went around him with desperate strength, burying her head against his jacket, instinctively avoiding exposed skin. He'd thought she was going to cry but she hadn't, shaking with repressed sobs, and he remembered what she'd said about her mutation and how long must've been avoiding human touch.

To his surprise, that was a memory he liked--and fuck, that was just sick.

The green eyes studied him for several long seconds and he turned his head from the unnerving gaze, taking another bite. Briskly, she stood up, walking by him to the refrigerator, the edge of her robe brushing his arm. Taking a breath, he smelled her fear, just below concern and a little frustration.

"Look, if I had anywhere else to take her, you think I'd bring her here?" He knew he sounded defensive--well, because he was defensive.

A pause while she opened the fridge. Then a soft sigh.

"Yeah, I know. Were you followed?"

"Nope. Whoever the hell it was, he's not goin' anywhere anytime soon."

Maybe she saw the look of satisfaction on his face and he caught himself rubbing his knuckles without thinking. That'd been a damned good fight.

"Ah." He turned to watch her rummage through the shelves, pulling out a covered bowl and the milk. "All right. How long do you want me to keep her?"

"Until I can find someplace safe for her."

The fridge closed and she crossed behind him, putting the bowl in the microwave and setting the time with quick flicks of her fingers.

Safe. Interesting idea, with that damned Mutant Registration Act. No, nowhere safe in America, not for someone like her, not if that damned thing passed. She wasn't one of the muties that would be able to pass as normal, either. They'd sweep her right up. Shit.

"What about her parents?"

Good question. Logan finished up the first sandwich and shook his head.

"She's been runnin' for eight months. If she could go back, she would."

The wide green eyes came up, startled.

"Eight months? She's just a kid--how the hell--"

"Yeah." He wondered about that too--maybe he'd ask her someday about that. Though that look on her face--hell, he knew that look, had seen it on his own more than once. She'd lost everything that ever meant anything to her and she was still trying. And at her age--he shook his head, staring down at the plate.

Empathy wasn't his specialty.

As Jamie made a sandwich, Logan started on his second one, watching her covertly as she put a tray together--sandwich, milk, soup, everything a starving mutant girl needed. Then paused, sitting down again. "She's in the shower--I left her some clothes. Logan--" she trailed off and he saw her stare down at her hands. "Look--"

"I'll pay you whatever you want, Jamie."

She gave him a frustrated look.

"I haven't worried about money for years, so that's not a problem. Is she **gonna** stay? The last thing I need is to be huntin' her up if she takes it into her head to run--much less get caught with an underage runaway--or a mutant--I don't want or need that kind of attention and you know it."

"She won't." And he'd have a talk with her to make sure of that, too. Jamie sighed softly, nodding, and Logan let out a breath he hadn't even known he'd been holding.

"Alright, I'll take your word for it--and I'll take hers too. How long you gonna stay?"

"Tonight. I'll leave tomorrow, try gettin' some answers."

"Nope. Day after tomorrow, you go." She smirked at his surprise. "If she's gonna be here, I gotta do some shopping. She ain't got anything to wear and I'm sure as hell not gonna leave that little thing all alone out here. Unless, of course, you wanna go." She snickered at his growl. "Didn't think so."

"I'll give you money."

"I can cover it--"

"She's mine--my responsibility." He finished up the second sandwich and Jamie grinned oddly, then picking up the tray. "I'll take care of it."

"As you wish, darlin'."

Jamie found Rogue standing uncertainly in the center of the spare bedroom, damp hair brushed and pulled into an uncertain ponytail, wet tail trailing over one flannel-coated shoulder. Her hands and the arms beneath the pajamas Jamie had hunted up were encased in the long gloves, which needed to be washed badly. From the look of them, they were already ruined.

Somehow, she just didn't think the kid would strip them, though.

"Rogue?" She kept her voice low, gentle, not wanting to startle someone whose nerves were already shot. The girl's head snapped up and Jamie felt the dark eyes follow her with the wariness of a trapped animal as she crossed the room and set the tray on the bed. Trust issues--not a surprise, eight months was a long time for a kid her age.

"Thank you," the girl whispered. The steady gaze was unnerving--with Logan's information, however, it made sense, in a way.

"You hungry, honey?" she asked, noticing the girl made no move to approach the tray. After a moment of thought, Jamie realized why--human proximity. With a casual smile, she backed to a chair and sat down, and was rewarded with Rogue slowly walking to the bed and taking a seat. With an apologetic look, the girl attacked the food with both glove-encased hands.

Which gave Jamie the perfect opportunity to study her.

Mutant--Jamie had seen her share, both the kind that could pass and the ones that never could. Rogue displayed the usual characteristics of her kind--light paranoia, nervous energy, suspicion, and some signs of shock--probably from the attack that Jamie had neglected to ask much about.

Rogue. Obviously not her real name, just as obviously Logan had decided to let her keep it a

secret. Understandable.

"How long has it been since you ate properly, honey?" she said, as Rogue finished off the sandwich, wiping her fingers distractedly on the napkin she'd carefully spread on her lap before beginning. Dark eyes came up, narrowing just a little. Then changed, growing steadily thoughtful.

"A coupla weeks," she answered carefully, dipping her spoon into the soup. Eyes went back down. "Ran out of money."

Money made the world go 'round, Jamie had always known that. She leaned back, keeping her posture carefully casual, as if it was every day people dropped on her doorstep with little girls in tow. Rogue was all raw nerves and energy--Jamie looked her over with expert eyes, used to evaluating young girls for their potential money-making capacity. The soft old flannel hung around the girl in heavy folds, revealing a thin body that would border on emaciation soon given the slightest chance. Also nicely obscured her actual age--Jamie would bet that the girl was at least seventeen, though anyone looking at her would drop her in fifteen easy. Traces of baby-fat in her face already been whittled slowly away, and she didn't miss the circles beneath the dark eyes, coated carefully in make-up. Pride. The girl hadn't wanted anyone to see what kind of condition she was in. Didn't like pity.

Jamie could understand that. She'd bet that Logan did too.

"So why aren't you with your folks, honey?"

The spoon dropped with a clatter into the now-empty bowl and Marie jerked, looking up. The whole thin body went tense.

"They don't want me."

It was dropped between them, a single defiant statement that demanded no response. The suspicion was back in force, and Jamie decided that was enough questions for the evening. The girl finished off her milk hurriedly, and Jamie gave a quick glance to the tray--empty.

"Are you still hungry, darlin'?" she asked, and Rogue quickly shook her head, wiping fingers and mouth quickly before neatly folding the napkin and placing it back on the tray.

"No, ma'am, thank you." She shifted slightly, preparing to get the tray herself, but Jamie intercepted her, and she watched the girl's entire body jerk away as she picked it up.

"None of that. I'm Jamie, always have been." Though Madam had once been an appropriate enough title, and that made her smile a little in memory. "Get some sleep, honey. You look exhausted."

Brown eyes suddenly dug into her.

"Is--is Logan still here?"

Interesting. She checked the clenched hands, wanting suddenly to cover them with her own, take that look of naked fear off her face. It was unexpected--she'd seen too many girls like this in her life to be moved by it anymore, had been one herself more years ago than she cared to count.

"He's here, sweetheart." Smiled gently. "You'll see him in the morning, okay? Now go to sleep." She didn't miss the relaxation in the girl's body and smiled again. "Good night,

honey."

She watched Rogue climb into the bed with a child's enthusiasm, wondering how long it'd been since she'd had someplace safe to sleep--and again, that unexpected shaft of compassion. As the girl laid down, she flipped the light off, closing the door, knowing somewhere in her the girl would get up to check and see if it was locked.

That only made her like her more.

Someone was yelling.

Marie woke up with absolutely no idea where she was. She struggled onto her knees, grabbing for her cloak and finding only blankets beneath her hands.

{Blankets?}

Time to re-evaluate the situation. Taking a breath against utter panic, Marie sat back.

Logan. Jamie.

Big furry guy tried to kill her.

{Oh God.}

It began so suddenly she barely had time to register the flood of emotion--pure relief--before she began to cry--buried her head in the blankets to drown it out, shutting her eyes against the utter relief that coursed through her. God, she was safe--she wasn't hungry--she wasn't alone.

He knew what she was and hadn't tossed her into the street like garbage, like everyone else had.

It was several minutes before she could stop--when she'd left home, she hadn't cried. Not since that moment with Cody in her room, collapsed against the wall, trying to control the flow of memories and personality and habits, thoughts and ambitions and fears that had taken her over so suddenly and so completely she hadn't even known who she was or why she was screaming. Only knew that something was very wrong, one of them was hurt, and if someone had asked her, she wouldn't have even been able to tell who.

A low growl and she lifted her head, surprised by the sound, recognizing it--that bar, his stare at those two men, then dark eyes fixing on her, seeing her sitting there, watching him stand up to those who attacked him--did mutants do that, stand up against normal humans? Could they? Humans owned the world--her kind were what they hunted and executed on sight. She knew what they did--she'd seen what they did, on the open streets of St. Louis. Ducking into an alley, head down, praying they couldn't sense it on her, her difference.

{Logan.}

Logan, who'd brought her here like an abandoned puppy and for the first time in longer than she could remember, she wasn't hungry, wet, cold, scared. Safe.

Well, scared, yes. But not as much.

It'd been so long--Marie bit into her lip and twisted her fingers through the soft blankets, the feel of the old-fashioned quilt familiar, the clean smell of the pillows. The clean smell of herself--God, how long since she'd had a decent shower? Standing under hot water until her skin burned--washing off filth that had more to do with what was in her than what was on her. Touching her own skin in wonder, amazed that it was clean, finally, after so long.

Shelters, truckers, buses, and right this second, she didn't have a penny to her name, nothing to pay anyone with. And for obvious reasons, he wouldn't accept the type of payment a lone girl without money could offer. Even if she knew how to do it.

Another growl and Marie straightened on the bed, tears slowly drying, eyes going to the door. Considered for a minute, remembering the embrace outside--him and Jamie, her name had been?--

{Ah. Right. That.}

With a strangled sigh, she lay back down, pulling the covers up to her chin and staring at the ceiling. She wasn't used to sleeping straight through a night--God, when had the last time been?

{New York. St. Mary's shelter.} The last time she'd eaten properly, remembering the long looks of the women around her, the significant glances of the volunteers at her gloved arms. They thought she was a junkie. Fair enough. She'd sat through morning Mass wondering why God had done this to her, skipping out before the volunteers got around to asking her any questions, feet on the street.

Mutants were not welcome in the world, she knew that much. Meridian, Jackson, Memphis, St. Louis, New York, Baltimore, they'd taught her that.

So north, drawn like a magnet.

{Okay, so one night here--maybe he's taking me to town tomorrow.} But tomorrow was nebulous, something she hadn't tried to think about very much. Hell, an hour was a scary stretch of unknown territory--an hour made the difference between buying water in a bar and being attacked by someone who wanted her--or Logan--or both of them--

An hour was following the mute jerks of the man who dragged her along chill, snow-coated asphalt and sliding adamantium into the lock of a car. Shoved her in the passenger seat, tossing the heat on, telling her to shut up before he threw her out. Chewing on a cigar for all it was worth, growling at the weather, but utterly at ease hotwiring a car.

He scared her. But just remembering him made her body relax in the blankets--he was here. She was safe.

Marie fell back asleep without another thought--she'd learned that when you had the chance, you didn't waste it.

Logan saw her when he walked into the kitchen.

She was perched on a stool, curled over a bowl of cereal, looking considerably better than she had when he'd last seen her. Big eyes came up--eyes too large for her face--fixing on him

with utter and complete focus, a little unnerving. More than a little unnerving, truth be told. The plaid pajamas--blue, comfortably worn, rumpled--were too large for her, making her look even younger than her claimed age. The dark hair was neatly brushed back, secured in a ponytail--hell, except for the thinness and the gloves that coated her hands, she could have been any kid in any kitchen eating her breakfast before going off to school.

"Morning," he managed. He wasn't a morning person and even more, he wasn't used to greeting someone in the morning--he avoided the whole morning after routine whenever possible. Vaguely, as he sifted through Jamie's cabinets, the unfamiliarity of the situation tickled him and he growled to himself.

"Mornin'," she whispered, and he could still feel those eyes on him, watching him, making the skin on his back crawl. Padding barefoot to the refrigerator, he ducked his head inside and instantly got the damned door smashed into his head.

"Shit, Jamie," he growled, and heard her soft laugh.

"Good morning everyone." Oh fuck, Jamie was a morning person. He'd forgotten that. He jerked his head out of the fridge, giving her a glare. Already dressed--how the fuck did she get up so early and still look that good? "Oops, sorry, honey." She didn't sound too damned sorry. "Why doncha make yourself useful and go cut some wood or do whatever it is you do? I'm gonna cook--and of every man I've met, you are the worst cook." She shooed him with one manicured hand. "Get dressed and get out before little Rogue over there has heart-failure watching you pad around in jeans and nothin' else."

His eyes went to Marie, who had flushed all the colors of a sunset and her eyes were now firmly fixed on her bowl. Feeling remarkably exposed--there was probably a good reason why when he had sex he tended to run before morning--Logan growled again and stalked out, hearing Jamie laughing behind him.

Jamie settled on the stool, fixing her eyes on Rogue.

"You feel better, honey?"

Rogue swallowed quickly, almost choking, and Jamie noted the napkin spread neatly in the girl's lap, the way she held her spoon, the straight back. Different from most street girls, definitely.

"Yes, ma'am."

"Jamie," she corrected firmly. "You wanna tell me how old ya are, honey?" she asked as she poured herself a cup of coffee. She heard the girl's breath draw in sharply.

There was a long pause and Jamie sipped her coffee, keeping her entire body relaxed, calm, at ease, using every trick she knew to encourage confidence.

"Seventeen," she answered, a little warily, eyes flickering up once to take in Jamie's reaction. But there was none, and she thought she saw the girl relax a little.

"Let's do proper introductions, since I think you were a bit too tired last night," Jamie said easily. "Jamesina Richards." She smiled as Rogue lifted her head again, not bothering to extend her hand, knowing that would make the girl even more uncomfortable.

"Rogue, Ma'--Jamie."

"Where ya from?" From the accent and the mannerisms, Jamie was placing her Deep South. Probably rural.

Another pause, and Jamie took a casual drink of her coffee as the girl considered her answer. From the corner of her eyes, she followed the debate written clearly on Rogue's face, how much to tell, how much not to. What was safe and what wasn't.

"Mississippi."

Jamie nodded.

"I lived in Canton when I was younger, sugar," she said, and Rogue's lips twitched. "Southern girl--always have good manners. I've always noticed it." Putting down the empty coffee cup, Jamie stood up, deciding this would have to be done in stages--even better if she could get Logan in the room at the same time. Jamie guessed that Rogue would be more amenable to questioning if she thought Logan wanted the answers as well--gratitude was a strong motivator. As she rose to rummage through the refrigerator, she smiled to herself when the girl quickly finished up her cereal, putting the bowl in the dishwasher.

"Can I help?"

Pride. She hid her smile and nodded.

"Sure you can."

Rogue was wondering around outside after breakfast--still utterly amazed by the amount of snow, it seemed. Jamie, taking her coffee, slipped down on the couch, watching Logan watch Rogue through the window.

Interesting.

"I'm leaving in a few minutes to go into Calgary. You need to talk to her."

Logan grunted something and Jamie took a sip.

"Why'd you pick her up?" He spun around, unreadable eyes--Logan was familiar, had been for over a decade, but that didn't make it any easier to understand him--well, in this case at least. "No screwing with me now--this ain't somethin' you do, no question, honey."

"I've picked up hitchhikers."

"Not many you'd drag across the better part of Alberta in a stolen car. And certainly none you didn't screw later--not that they were unwilling--you tend to attract that type." A raise of his eyebrows, admitting nothing. "I saw the marks on the car door this morning--broken lock. You gonna explain or let me speculate? If I'm gonna keep her, I need to know a few things."

"It's not any of your business."

Jamie cradled the cup in her palm, blowing softly at the steam. Very defensive.

"She's a runaway. A mutant. And a kid. That's three points of business for me. I cut ya some

slack last night, but you gotta give me some answers."

"Your job meant risk. Don't screw around, Jamie--if you don't want her here, I'll take her with me."

"And do what with her?"

Logan's jaw clenched--she'd bet he'd spent the better part of the morning thinking this through. Unfamiliar territory indeed.

"I can take care of her."

A soft sigh. Jamie was rather curious what he would actually do with her--drop her in random motels while he went out and fought? There was nothing about his attitude that made her think he'd leave her at a bus stop somewhere with money and a growl--though she wasn't going to test that theory either, not when she watched the girl throw a snowball at a nearby tree, heard a delighted rippling laugh from outside that caught Logan's attention again, jerking his gaze back outside.

"You're thinking long term, aren't ya, Logan?"

Logan growled something, and Jamie stood up, watching Marie wandering around the snow, staring into the distance, gloved hands tucked into her cloak. It was bothering him--she'd never seen him in their decade acquaintance so utterly off-balance, and it was all wrapped up in that girl standing outside, almost perfectly still, as if she was aware she was being watched. Hell, she could be--those dark eyes didn't miss much, Jamie thought.

"No." He was fighting it, hard, the entire idea of it, even though Jamie knew some part of him had pretty much accepted that the presence of the seventeen year old in his life was somewhat permanent. "Temporary. Just until--"

"Until what? You can't drop her at a bus station with a twenty and tell her to figure it out on her own, Logan. When you picked her up, you knew it wasn't for a ride to the nearest city. Don't try to deny it. Look at me." Hazel eyes flickered to hers--sometimes human eyes, sometimes not. Definitely not completely human right now.

"She's a kid and she's alone--"

"And she's a mutant."

"I could smell it on her in the bar." A tightening of the muscles in his jaw. "She was watching me fight--I recognized her scent in the cage."

"And she still hitchhiked with you? I'm impressed with her courage, if not her good sense."

The very slightest relaxation of his jaw.

"Yeah." Quiet.

It was speculation on Jamie's part, meandering through all Logan's possible motives--getting the girl horizontal, skin problem or no, wasn't high on the list, though she wasn't dismissing it completely. Logan hated to be tied by anything--hated the world in general, people in particular, and everything as a rule she'd never seen broken. Exception being Jamie herself, and she suspected that was pure random chance that'd he'd kept even minimal contact for as long as he did.

On some level, Jamie suspected he identified with her. And she bet dollars to donuts that he identified with the little girl playing outside under his eyes.

Here was Rogue. Normal enough girl, mutant or not--and Logan had brought her here--asked for help, which really was enough to shock Jamie, no matter the provocation.

Outside, she watched the girl turn in a slow circle, cloak flaring around her, gloved hand coming out to catch the snow as it fell, a sudden smile lighting up her face, changing it completely. Jamie realized she'd caught her breath at the look on Rogue's face.

Then dark eyes fixed on the window, and even though Jamie knew Rogue couldn't see them watching her--the girl knew they were there. Logan anyway. That smile was all for him.

Marie watched Jamie drive away, the woman tossing her a wave before the truck disappeared.

And frowned.

God, she liked it here--the quiet, the isolation--no people to worry about, no need to be constantly on guard and scared someone would try to touch her, no questions or sidelong glances at her gloves and scarf--no suspicion, which had been pretty common in the east US, where the whole mutant situation was very much on people's minds.

She hadn't been this relaxed since Cody had kissed her and her life ended.

"Hey kid."

Marie spun around, looking up in surprise as Logan walked up behind her. Distinctly uncomfortable, gloved hands shoved in his jacket, looking at anything but her. She stared up at him, knowing she was staring, unable to really help it, even though it really was very rude and she knew better than that.

"Yeah?"

Different images of him--the man in the cage, having a damned good time kicking the ass of the other guy--the man letting her ride in his camper--the man dragging her across what seemed like miles of road that she barely remembered--the man this morning that she couldn't stop staring at.

God, she owed him a lot, and had no idea how the hell she was supposed to pay him back.

"You're gonna get too cold. Come inside." Without ceremony, he got hold of her elbow, pulling her along--and shock made her follow. Once in the door, she stripped her cloak, hanging it to dry over the concrete in the small foyer, and followed him mutely into the living room.

Then Logan pointed her toward a seat and she took it. Mystified.

"You're gonna stay here for awhile." It was dropped in her lap like a stone, and he let out a breath when he did it. She suspected it was relief.

Marie blinked.

"Huh?" Usually, you didn't have what you wanted thrown at you like that. So she'd misheard--wouldn't be the first time.

He left his jacket on a chair as he paced to the center of the living room, and she took in the dark sweater, the scowl--the cigar he pulled out, biting off the tip and looking utterly out of his depth. A great deal more human, less frightening, more intriguing, ripping her fascinated gaze from him to stare at his knuckles, wondering how it felt to have that metal slide out.

He said it hurt every time.

"Jamie. You'll stay with Jamie."

Two blinks, then Marie began to stand up. A glower, and Marie sat right back down, sinking into the soft brown cushions. Her mouth opened, shut, opened again, and finally words came, fast and hard and so mixed up she wasn't sure what she was even saying.

"I--you can take me to Calgary--I'll get a ride--"

"You don't have any money, any family--where the fuck are you going, anyway?"

"Anchorage."

He lit the cigar--was his hand shaky?--and turned that glower on her again.

"And do what?"

Getting there was the goal. What she'd do after was a mystery. It wasn't like she could just go for any job--in fact, thinking it over, which she now had the leisure to do, not desperately looking for food, shelter, clothing, another pair of gloves--it was beginning to be a point of debate. And Marie, while never having been accused of being the most practical person on earth, woke up to the fact that she had absolutely no idea.

But she'd be damned if she'd agree--she didn't want pity, no matter how perfectly, dizzyingly wrapped. Apparently, he took her silence as agreement, though.

"Exactly. Nothing. You go there, you'll probably freeze or starve to death--hell, you don't even have the clothes to survive the weather. And I've been there, kid, I know what I'm talking about."

"I can take care of myself." She'd done it so far pretty well, actually. Though the luxury of sitting in a warm room was beginning to make her doubt herself--she was attached to the shower. "I don't need someone to take care of me."

"Too damned bad. Live with it."

Oh. Marie looked up at him--he'd come to a decision about her life for her. She got the feeling he was used to making decisions.

"No."

To her surprise, the glower didn't increase. Instead, he put down the cigar and dropped into the chair to her left. Watching her. Maybe a little amused, she couldn't be sure, and that

made her wary.

"Tell me what you'll do in Anchorage, assuming someone can get you there."

Marie set her feet firmly on the floor and looked straight at him, keeping her gaze steady. Clapsed her hands, hoping he didn't see them shaking.

"I'll find a shelter, have them help me get a job."

A job. That made her a little dizzy, grounded her in more reality than she wanted to admit to. A job, a life--what kind of life would she have as a mutant anyway? Freezing to death, starvation--those had grown steadily more likely before she'd arrived in Laughlin.

"When you can kill with a touch, you're underage, and you're a mutant." Ouch. "Think about it. You even have ID? Not to mention that great mutant registration thing goin' on--that'll make it easy for you to find employment and somewhere to live."

"I can take care of myself." As if repetition would make it more true.

"Until you accidentally touch someone and their family strings you up in the nearest tree for murder. Or a few other options for the lynching of mutants--you grew up in the South and I've been there. I think your head can tell you what people'll do to you if they catch you, darlin'."

"I'm not staying here." But God, she wanted to. Wanted it so badly she could taste it, and knew he could read it in her face.

"Then your other choice is to go with me."

That wasn't what she expected him to say. Marie frowned.

"I could run from you."

"You couldn't get three miles before I'd find you." A ghost of a grin. "Good sense of smell **and** claws, darlin'."

"You can't watch me always."

"I could handcuff you to a bed--and the places I stay at don't really notice screaming." His voice was thoughtful--as if he'd thought it through or something. Hell, he might have, and a little smile, almost indistinguishable from a frown, was turning up the corner of his mouth. He **was** enjoying this. Marie sat back, staring at him in wonder.

"Why do you care?"

A shrug, and she knew she wouldn't get a damned thing out of him on that score. Tried again.

"I won't--"

"Make you a deal." Logan leaned back--yes, he was enjoying this a little, she thought, and it was confusing the hell out of her. "Give me six months to figure out why that bastard attacked us. Then I'll take you to Anchorage myself. Maybe even stay just to watch you get yourself hung in a tree. Sound good?"

"I don't--"

"I don't care. Give me your word you'll stay and not get Jamie into trouble--it's the least you can do, considering I did save your life."

And he was right about that.

"I don't have any way to pay--"

"We'll figure it out later. Promise me. I'll give you the benefit of the doubt and trust your word--if you run, Jamie'll have to go after you and you could put her in danger--whoever that guy was, he's probably still lookin'." Then a pause. "Look, under normal circumstances, I'd leave you in the nearest town and forget you ever existed. But I'm not too fond of someone tryin' to blow me up. So I got some people to talk to and figure out what the hell it is that guy wanted. So do this, consider it payback. And we're even."

Marie left out a breath. Stared at him

"Jamie--"

"Jamie's fine with it."

"But--"

"Promise." And he wasn't even trying to be threatening now, just utterly himself. Which was enough. "Now."

A little dazed, Marie nodded, swallowing in a dry throat before attempting to speak.

"I promise."

Marie heard the noises again--but this time, she was sure it wasn't sex.

{Logan?}

Uncertainly, she got to her knees on the bed, shutting her eyes, listening carefully to the sound of his voice. No, not sex--it sounded like a nightmare. And she had those--God, did she, some hers, some Cody's, all reaching into her, into dark places she didn't like to look at too closely once light broke through the window. Hesitantly, she placed both feet on the floor, standing up.

Another low groan, a growl--like someone was hurting him. Bad. And that decided her--she slipped her full weight off the bed, padding to the door, pausing for a second to listen again.

A yell that sent chills up her spine. God, no one should have to go through that. Opening the door, she checked the hallway, then made her way one door down to the room Logan was occupying--she had to wonder why Jamie had so many rooms she never used, when by her own admission she never had guests.

Then quickly peeked into Jamie's room--and yes, Jamie was asleep in there. Fair enough--he was alone, no one else was in there to wake him up. Carefully, she padded back down the hall and knocked sharply at his door.

Paused.

It didn't work. Damn.

Another knock, and she paused again, listening carefully for the sounds of waking, for something--but there was nothing, only a long, low growl--she'd never heard a human growl before him and it still made the hair on the back of her neck stand up. Sliding her hand around the knob, she turned it, opening into his room. He was barely visible, on his back, twisting under the blankets.

"Logan?" she whispered--God, she wasn't that stupid, was she? If he didn't waken to a pretty sharp knock, he wasn't going to hear her voice. Taking another step toward the bed, she took in the bare chest--{you don't need to be thinkin' like that, sugar}--bit down on her lip, and approached the side of the bed.

And realized, seconds before touching him, she was ungloved.

{Damn. Damn, damn, damn.}

Uncertain, Marie considered her options. Then decided.

"Logan." A little louder. Then again. "Logan!"

And something happened. He yelled something--she wasn't even sure it was English--and sat up, one arm going out--and something cold went through her. Oddly, it didn't hurt. She stared at Logan, seeing the hazel eyes come fully awake, staring at her as if she was--was--

God. She looked down and saw his knuckles pressed against her chest, and how odd, she could see the breaks in his skin. Ah, the cold--that was what it felt like for those claws to slide into you. It should have hurt--but all she felt was suddenly a little sleepy and it was a little harder to breathe. Hit a lung? Maybe.

For some reason, it didn't seem that bad--it was certainly easier than starvation, at any rate. So many problems solved just now, for both of them. But God, he didn't look good, and she tried to smile, tell him it was okay, she didn't mind.

"God, Marie--help. Jamie! Help! Shit, Marie--" He began to reach out and she shook her head--no use killing him while she died.

{shouldn't it hurt, just a little?}

"You were having a nightmare," she said, aware that it was probably inappropriate to be in his bedroom at this time of night, worrying with an odd light-headedness what her mother would think of her daughter wandering into a strange man's bedroom wearing pajamas two sizes too big and bare feet--she should wear a robe maybe.

{wear a robe for modesty. don't worry, momma, there's not much chance anyone'll ever want to touch me again, robe or not}

"I know." His voice was raspy and she didn't like what she saw in them--and she wanted to explain, to tell him that she didn't mind, that he'd done what eventually would have happened anyway and it didn't hurt, but she didn't have that kind of strength to talk, and there was a pleasant metal taste in her mouth--

{blood, your lungs are bleeding}

--no, this wasn't so bad at all.

"Oh God." Jamie was here.

She wanted to tell him all that, tell him not to look like that, it was just fine, but nothing came out of her mouth except something iron-tasting--{blood}--and she reached out--

--{remember what skin feels like, I wanna remember that, I wanna have that, just a brush}

--and his skin was rough under her fingers.

{Thank you, Logan. It wasn't that bad.}

And it happened.

It was a shock, like a barely remembered childhood memory of touching a sparking plug in the downstairs living room, a jolt that shot through her body--it didn't hurt, not until long later, but it flickered into every nerve, lighting her up, bring something deep within her fully awake and alive as she'd never been before. This time--it was shapes and images and things she didn't recognize, couldn't even identify--

--it was Cody all over again, but so different. The claws in her chest retracted instinctively but she didn't fall as heat spread through her, focusing on her chest, her back, riding into her mind, bringing more images, the blood on her tongue receding

{what is this, what the hell is she doing, Marie, baby, stop}

And startled, she stepped back--or did she fall?--she wasn't sure. Stared as the man in front of her toppled over, onto the floor. Pulling her hand close--was it her hand?

{Logan? Marie?}

Logan was on the floor and suddenly scents overwhelmed her--sweat and blood and perfume and detergent, so much so fast her eyes began to water, and she felt Jamie drop at her feet, beside Logan, stared down at them.

{I didn't mean to stab her, Jamie. It was an accident.}

"It was an accident," she whispered, and--and God, Logan was on the floor, she was Marie, Marie, not him, not--

--and the images were too much, she wanted to knock her head against something to clear the images, turning to the door, stumbling out, hitting the opposite wall and sinking down, trying to breathe through the shock, the smells, the tastes, the memories--

{--"I'm not like you."--}

{--"Does it hurt?" and she rubbed her knuckles, "Every damn time."--}

Covered her face with her hands and it was all too much, Marie couldn't stand up to all those thoughts competing for space, and she drew her legs up to her chest and began to rock.

Logan woke up and the first thing he saw was Jamie. She looked worried--which was odd, because he'd never seen Jamie worried before.

{Jamie? What the fuck is going on, where am I?}

God, did his head hurt, and that wasn't anywhere near normal.

And something against his head, her hand--the faint memory of dark eyes, fingers brushing his skin, something he did--somehow he'd done something very wrong.

{Marie.}

"Where's Rogue?" Somehow, even now, he remembered what to call her, God knew how. "Is she okay?" He began to sit up, but Jamie pushed him back down, planting a hand on his chest.

"Don't move. She's fine. How are you feeling?"

"Like I've been on a three day bender." He shut his eyes again and heard Jamie sigh in relief. "What the hell did she do to me?"

A pause, and he opened his eyes, seeing Jamie's frown of concentration.

"I'm not exactly sure--I didn't exactly major in advanced mutant powers in college, honey. Can you sit up?"

"Where is she?"

"In her room. Exhausted. She's sleeping."

A thousand thoughts flickered through Logan's head.

"Is her door locked?"

Startled, Jamie drew back, blinking, but Logan was already trying to get up--oh fuck did that hurt, fuck a ten day bender, upgrade it to three week, he'd **never** felt this bad before. With a growl, he sank back down. "Lock her door, Jamie. She may make a run for it."

"She won't." He felt the bed shift, Jamie getting on both knees, and suddenly he was horizontal again--her favorite position, the irony didn't escape him--before she backed back to the edge. "I dosed her with a sedative before I came to check on you. Lay still--regenerative or not, you were drained pretty far down."

"Is that what she did?" He looked up, saw the thoughtful look on Jamie's face.

"She said it's touch--that's all I could get out of her, she kept growling. Which brings me to my thought--she absorbs life, yes--but she borrowed your mutation, honey. She's fine--when she fell asleep I examined her and there isn't even a scar."

"Borrowed." Logan tentatively sat up and Jamie frowned but let him. Before he could think to ask, she shoved a glass of water in his hand.

"Drink. You should be okay--your breathing evened out after less than an hour. She took a

lot out of you--and trust me, it showed."

"Showed?"

Jamie smiled.

"You should see the banister--don't worry, honey, you can fix it before you take off to the Great Beyond. I had to sedate her just to keep her from hurting herself or any property. But she's okay otherwise." A pause. "Logan, it wasn't just your mutation she borrowed. She said some things--things that I don't think she'd know otherwise, or have done."

Logan took a breath, taking that in.

"She got my memories."

"I think so." Jamie's voice was gentle. "She hit on me once--a new experience, lemme tell you." Another pause. "Logan--" She paused, and he knew what she was going to say--that she couldn't keep Marie, that he'd have to find some other way, and he was trying to think of what to do--was locking her in a variety of motel rooms really feasible and God, his head hurt. "Logan, when you came, I wasn't sure about this, not at all. Her mutation--" A pause. "I've never seen anyone do anything like that, and I've seen a lot."

"Yeah." He wasn't sure what he meant there--it was just something to say, trying to figure out where Jamie was going with this. He looked up at her, perched on the edge of the bed, absently twisting her nightgown between her hands.

"So if she'll agree--you don't need to find her somewhere else. She'll stay here. For good, until she can figure out a way to unplug that gift of hers at very least." And the serious green eyes met his.

Logan wasn't sure what he felt--relief, definitely. Shock, yes. But more than that--he felt himself begin to smile, taking a breath against the sudden relaxation of his body.

"If we can convince her of that," Jamie added. Logan nodded slowly--the headache was receding nicely, he could think clearly again.

"I'll take care of it."

Jamie flipped the television off as Logan walked out of Marie's room, just as dawn was showing its head above the horizon.

"She'll stay." He dropped on the couch, and beneath the scowl she could see the lines of tiredness--he was still drained from Marie, no doubt, and it was showing. But beneath even that was cool satisfaction--Logan tended toward winning without getting around to counting the cost. Gently, she reached out, touching his arm, and he shook his head.

"You sure?"

There was the slightest curve of his lips before he nodded slowly.

"Got her promise--she'll stay." A low sigh, almost inaudible. "I've fucking lost my mind--I just spent thirty minutes convincing a kid I didn't even know fucking **existed** a few days ago to

trust me."

"Be careful, Logan, or you might start resembling a human being or something." His low growl amused her and she motioned toward the bags on the floor. "I need to get this up to her when she gets up. She asleep?" Logan nodded, wincing a little, and Jamie frowned. "What's wrong?"

"Her nightmare." At Jamie's incomprehension, Logan sank a little farther into the cushions and pulled out a cigar. "One of my personal favorites--isn't she the lucky one? Shit."

Jamie looked thoughtful for a moment.

"That will be interesting--did she growl at you?"

That startled him a little and Logan cracked a smile without even meaning to, she could see it in his face.

"Yeah. Twice. Second time she noticed and turned red. Cute." He played with the cigar, which really was enough to make her smile. His mind was clearly elsewhere. "Why the hell am I doing this?"

"What's your instinct?"

The dark eyes met hers briefly and Jamie knew he'd already decided, saw it reflected in the recesses of his mind, the places that were mysteries even to him. Probably made the decision in that destroyed camper, and he shook his head, glancing at the stairs behind him briefly before putting the cigar away.

"I've got to get ready to go."

Jamie smirked.

"You do that."

She was standing in the living room, wrapped up in a heavy sweater and jeans, arms curled around herself, gloved hands cupping her elbows. The long dark hair was drawn up from her face in a ponytail, making her look impossibly young. Staring into the fireplace, her profile outlined in orange, he thought she might have been crying. God, don't let her start now. If he didn't know what to do with scared kids, he sure as hell didn't have a clue what to do with crying ones. Uncomfortably, he shifted, wondering why he was putting this off.

"Marie." Get it done already.

She spun on her heel and her hands came up fast, wiping her face with the tips of her fingers. So she didn't want him to see it--and something in him twisted a little. It was strange, to matter so much to someone. He wasn't sure he'd ever get used to it.

"You runnin' again?" And if she thought her voice was casual, she wasn't fooling anyone, least of all him.

"Yeah. I got some things to do."

She nodded slowly, not making a move toward him, eyes downcast.

"I'll be back."

She nodded again, a little jerkily, hands fiddling with the edge of her sweater. Beneath the black leather, he could see the knuckles were tense.

"Yeah," she said softly, then looked up. God, was that guilt? Then a rush of words, so fast it was hard to catch them all. "I--I'm sorry. I didn't mean to hurt you--"

Oh fuck. She thought he was leaving because of her. He shook his head quickly, taking a step toward her, watched her draw back, arms curling tighter around herself, eyes wide. "Marie, it doesn't have anything to do with you--you know that." Well, not exactly true, but nothing to do with what she was worried about. Her head went down again and he took the two steps that separated them, catching her around the waist, drawing her close. Both hands came out to stop him and he had to grin, wondering a little to himself when exactly she started amusing him. "Stop that--shit, Marie, you're better covered than a nun. I won't get hurt." Cupped the back of her head gently, looking down at her. "I'm not leaving because of that. I wanna find out some stuff, and I can't do it from here."

It was slow, the way she relaxed against him finally, letting him touch her, and she nodded a little, but it didn't remove the shadow from her eyes, the tightness of her mouth.

"I'll be back. I promise."

Her head went down again and she nodded quickly. Carefully, he let her go, looking at her bent head, the edge of the ponytail brushing her cheek. When she looked up, her eyes were dry, but he saw her strained smile. For a second, he looked at that smile, how hard she was trying, then felt around his neck, the tags that had been the only thing he'd ever kept. Staring down at her, he pulled them off, catching her hand, and folding them up into her palm. She stared down, startled, and he closed her fingers with his over the metal.

Two things he'd keep now, and God, who knew he'd ever get attached to someone like her.

"Keep these until I get back, okay?" he said. Wide dark eyes stared into his, and she nodded mutely. Another brush of her hair, and he tilted her head up. "Promise me you won't be runnin' anywhere, Marie."

Her lips quirked.

"I'll be here when you get back," she said, and there was her smile, reaching into her eyes this time. He nodded quickly, turning away, finding his bag by the door and walked out. Jamie was waiting by the car, the wind picking up loose strands of blonde hair.

"I changed the plates and new registration is waiting for you in Vancouver," she said as he opened the trunk. "Sell it as soon as you get in town."

"I know that much," he shot back, giving her a wicked grin, and saw her eyebrows jump. She glanced back at the door and he circled the car as she leaned against the driver's side, her coat wrapped close around her. "I'll get her some identification and mail it once I get to Calgary. Just in case." He'd thought this through the night before, what it would take to keep her relatively safe. He paused. "Thanks, Jamie. For doing this."

"She's a sweet girl," Jamie answered easily. "She's gonna miss you."

Logan nodded, glancing back at the door, and didn't miss the smug smile she threw at him when he looked back. "What?"

"Nothin'." Though the grin didn't diminish at all and he growled, hearing her snicker in response. Women.

"Here." Before he forgot, he pulled out his wallet, dropping most of his cash into her surprised palm. Before she could object, he folded her fingers over it. "In case she needs anything. I've got enough to get by. I'll be back soon."

She nodded again and gave him a quick hug, drawing back, the smirk back. Over her shoulder, he saw Marie standing at the window, face pale--she ducked when she saw him looking at her and it made him smile.

"If she needs anything--if anything happens, you know how to contact me."

The look on Jamie's face was priceless--that was fun. She shook her head quickly.

"She'll be fine. But she could probably stand to hear from you once in awhile. If you get bored screwing around the provinces." She paused, her tone becoming deliberate. "Be careful." What she didn't say he already knew and he nodded, glancing at the window again, catching a glimpse of white skin before it disappeared again, and this time he couldn't help the laugh. Jamie hit him on the shoulder, drawing back, and Logan got in, giving the window one last glance.

Marie didn't duck this time, and one gloved hand waved a little from behind the glass. That was an image he'd take with him for more miles than he ever suspected possible.

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