

X to the Highest Power, Part 1 by B Nickerson {Rated PG}

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Chapter 11

Logan and Andi walked into the nondescript tavern Phillipe Lanier had specified, one owned by people he trusted. The barkeep, washing glasses behind the bar, caught their eye and pointed down a short hallway. Tired of the PI business already, Logan gently caught Andi's arm, "I'm staying out here," he hissed, indicating the bar. She nodded and left him to settle on a stool to order a long-neck and light a cigar. He exhaled a blue stream of smoke, content to be alone for awhile and idly roamed his eyes over the rows of liquor bottles. The place was pretty empty still, and, though he heard someone few straggle in now and again, he paid them no mind.

Andi lightly rapped the designated office door near the end of the hall. "Come in," a voice answered. She found Phillipe Lanier, a heavy, balding man pacing nervously, waiting for her. Offering her a chair, he sat behind the desk and held out a dog-eared manila envelope.

In the bar, Logan suddenly felt his neck-hair stand on end. Darting a glance around, he saw a guy at the end of the bar was shyly wiggling his fingers in a wave and smiling sweetly. He exhaled smoke his direction, then peered suspiciously around and glimpsed a couple guys holding hands at a corner table. He glanced furtively in the direction he'd seen Andi go, then focused exclusively and uneasily on his beer, thinking, "*And it had to be one of these places!*"

In the office, Andi was busy examining the envelope's contents. It was mostly xeroxed office memos and copies of e-mails, then she looked at Lanier. "So, let me get this straight. Macgoldrick was dealing adamantium to a terrorist organization in exchange for a bomb? And you weren't in on it?"

Lanier nodded. "I discovered it by accident. The company wasn't doing so well and I know Klaus believed he was on the verge of being fired, so he tried to pad his nest for an early retirement. The bomb went off in the data storage department--mostly in-house records were destroyed."

"Convenient. Was he padding the insurance and fire investigator's nests, too?"

His eyes flitted nervously as he nodded. "Back then, the black market demand for adamantium was such you could set any price and get it."

"Then Macgoldrick got greedy and didn't play straight with his terrorist friends, so they killed him *and* his buddies?"

"I'm not certain, but I think something like that."

A little disappointed, Andi stuffed the paperwork back in the envelope and handed it back. "Those guys are long gone, Mr. Lanier. I think you should just burn this and get on with your life."

He looked relieved as he accepted it. With that, she stood to leave. She'd already noted hints in the office decor as to what sort of bar this was and was worried about Logan, out there, alone...and what he might do. She hurried out.

The bartender abruptly thumped a new beer in front of Logan. "From the gentleman," he said, pointing. Logan's apprehensive eyes followed his finger toward the wiggly-fingered waver at the end of the bar, still smiling sweetly. Just then, an arm encircled his neck, startling him. It was Andi. Relieved, he reflexively threw an arm around her waist. She grabbed the new beer, saluted it's flirtatious buyer and took a slug. Then, setting it back down, turned Logan's face to her own. "Logan, honey, how about we get out of here?" She winked at him as she gave his mutton-chop a playful tug.

He grinned. "I'd love it, Cupcake."

So, with arms around each other's waists, they walked out, though as soon as they were beyond the door, Andi grimaced. She hated beer.

He heaved a sigh of relief. "Just in time. Thanks."

She patted his waist, "Can't have you slicing and dicing fruitcake, now can I?"

As they neared the car, he reluctantly let her wiggle free. Her news about what Lanier had to say disappointed him. "This was a real waste of time then," he grumbled.

Andi shrugged. "Barking up the wrong tree goes with the territory sometimes. Besides, whoever experimented on you went to great lengths cover their tracks and fifteen years doesn't make it any easier."

He just grunted in reply. He knew that better than she did and didn't need reminding. Pulling into their motel, he flopped on the bed as soon as they got in, since he was still suffering from jet-lag, and fell asleep listening to her talk to Jack on the room-phone.

Hunger woke him, the light sandwiches from lunch having worn off and he swung his feet to the floor. Andi, who was working her cross-words at the table, looked up. "Ready for some supper?" she asked. "It's about that time."

He just groaned to his feet, went to the john, then ran a brush through his hair, not even bothering with his unruly cowlicks. "Let's go," he grumbled as he came back and grabbed his jacket. She quickly grabbed hers and he drove them to a steak restaurant the desk clerk had recommended.

Feeling more talkative on a full stomach and a beer, Logan inquired about Andi's background and learned she'd grown-up with six sibling's on a horse ranch in Kentucky, which her older brother now owned. Only five of her sibling's still lived, since not all had inherited the long-life trait. Her mother, youngest sister, and nephew currently owned a big place in Australia she'd never been to and that Andi and her daughter, Jana, didn't get along. Ordering another beer, he lit a cigar and recounted a few of his own stories, complaining he couldn't rescue a dog without getting dragged into something more. That's how he'd spent a month driving an eighteen-wheeler. While hitching, the trucker who picked him up ended up being in such desperate straits, he filled-in for him. Then there was a farm where he repaired some machinery, but because the family was being stupidly ostracized by the community and couldn't get other help, he stayed to help bring in the harvest. "It's always weird stuff, too," he snorted. "I even helped deliver a baby once."

Andi laughed. "You're kidding?"

"Na, it was back when I was hitching the rails some years ago. I met a young couple down on their luck and pregnant---I mean, really pregnant!" He curved his arms in front of him like an invisible beach ball was in his lap. "I helped her husband boost her into the boxcar and, wouldn't you know it, she went into labor during the ride. So, there we were---me and her husband, both ignorant as sin, in a dingy old boxcar, trying to figure out how to help her have the baby." Logan shook his head. "I only remember two things about it. It was the most amazing thing I've ever been part of and," he made a face, "the messiest."

"So, did they name the baby after you?"

"Fortunately not." With softened eyes, he added, "But before I got off, I gave them every dime I had and wished them luck." He polished off his beer, then grumbled, "So I let Rogue get in my truck and now I'm signed up to save the world!"

"Logan, you just have too much heart."

He snorted. "I'm a world class sap, that's what." His smile faded though, when he noticed that haunted, far away look on her face again.

Afterwards, at the motel, he just dropped her off at their room saying, "I'll be back later." He wasn't in the mood to be cooped-up. It was near midnight when he finally did come back and found the light on and the TV still mumbling to itself. Andi had fallen asleep, lying crossways on her bed with the remote lying inches from her listless hand. Quietly setting his half-empty whiskey bottle on the night stand, he switched off the TV, used the john, brushed his teeth, stripped to the waist for bed, then pulled his bedspread off his bed and lightly cast it over her. Then, he spotted her palm-pilot on the table and curiosity drew him to it. He picked it up and studied the perplexing little instrument, trying to remember just how he'd seen her work it. After several tries, he finally succeeded in finding tomorrow's agenda, which he knew was a drive back to Edmonton to stay overnight for their early New York flight. He also found "Happy Birthday to me" annotated. He gave Andi a glance, remembering

Jack had mentioned her birthday being soon, then without a second thought, shut-down the pilot, switched off the lights and dropped into bed.

Strange sounds woke him. He sat bolt upright and stared around the dim room until his eyes fell on the bedspread thrashing about on the other bed, where the loud moans and whimpers were coming from. Then, with a savage cry, Andi suddenly threw it off, sprang to her feet and flung herself across the room against the far wall where she stood with her back to it, panting and cradling her left arm as if hurt.

Snapping to his feet, Logan edged toward her cautiously, his arms spread and hands open. "Easy," he told her, trying to keep his tone calm and even as possible. "It's okay. It's me. Logan. Remember? We're in a motel in Alberta." She peered at him through wild hair like a caged animal. Edging closer, he said again, "Easy. Everything's okay."

Then, just as suddenly, she seemed to shake herself out of it and brushed abruptly past him to the sink. There, she turned on the water and splashed it on her face, then just hovered above the rushing water a couple minutes before finally turning it off and grabbing a towel. He watched her with a peculiar sense of déjà-vu.

"Sorry, I woke you," she said, tossing the towel aside.

He gently gripped her elbow. "Com'on. I have just what you need." He directed her to sit on the bed facing his. Switching on a lamp, he fetched the plastic cups from beside the ice holder, sat opposite her, rapidly unwrapped them and filled one about a quarter full with whiskey. "Here," he said, handing it to her. He filled his own cup more generously.

Andi stared at the golden liquid dubiously. "So, you think this cures bad dreams?"

"Sometimes." He downed his. "Swig it," he ordered.

Grimly, Andi put the cup to her lips and threw her head back. It went down--like a fire poker. She coughed a couple times, then cleared her throat and, with a grimace, set the cup aside.

"Now let's have it," he said, tightening the lid back on the bottle and setting it aside. His green-yellow eyes looking directly into hers. "Level with me. What's going on?"

Andi sighed. She'd been waiting for the right time to tell him and this seemed as good a moment as any. "It seems your nightmares have become my nightmares."

"What?"

She indicated the dog-tags hanging against his bare chest. "I had this big idea to take your dog-tags to a psychic." Logan's look became skeptical. "I know--- it was a weird shot in the dark, but I thought it might turn up something useful to work with and she was a reputable one with a long record of police assistance."

"So, that was your trip to New York?"

"As a matter of fact it was. How did you..." she began, then realized how he knew. "Jack?"

He nodded. "Then what?"

"Well, I gave her your dog-tags to read. She had to get past Rogue first, since she was the last holder, but once she did, her eyes got really wide and she just didn't seem able to speak. She seemed frozen in terror. After awhile, thinking she was in trouble, I tried to pull the tags out of her fingers, but when I touched them..." Andi hesitated, "Suddenly I was there, too."

"Where?" Logan demanded, intensely interested.

"Wherever you were, I suppose. Somehow I connected to what she was seeing. It's hard to describe, mostly flashes and impressions. People in protective medical garb. A sense of being tied down and plunged into icy cold water. Then pain, I felt a hot, incredible burning pain." She shuddered, reflexively pulling a knee to her chest and hugging it sullenly, eyes closed.

Logan stared at her astonished and speechless. He found it incredible she shared a piece of his life he only vaguely recalled in his worst nightmares. He didn't know what to say and "I'm sorry" hardly seemed adequate. When her eyes opened and met his, they were suddenly ferocious. She whispered harshly, "I don't know what you hoped to do when you found these people, but if you want to kill them--I'll help."

With a start, he recognized her dangerous side, the lion in her and his pulse quickened and skin prickled with

heat. He straightened to shake it off, blaming the whiskey. The look faded quickly though and her eyes returned to their mossy-green softness.

She yawned. "I feel so sleepy," she said, sliding under her covers. "Don't worry," she murmured, "I could hardly sleep the first week, but it's getting better." Her eyes were drifting closed. "I can handle it...." With a final sigh, she was asleep.

Logan stared at her, unsure whether she should be hugged or spanked. He switched out the light again and laid awake thinking a long time, caught between a lion and a lamb. That's when he decided he wouldn't let her birthday slip by unnoticed.

They were on the road for Edmonton by late-morning and once there, settled into a motel near the airport. On a pretense of smoking, Logan went to the lobby to get recommendations and directions to a restaurant suited to a birthday celebration. That's where he took her for dinner, and as soon as they ordered, he excused himself to secretly arrange getting a dessert with a candle. Andi was completely surprised when their servers arrived singing "happy birthday" and delivered a slice of chocolate cheesecake with a candle. Her blush of delight made it worth all the trouble.

"How'd you know?" she asked.

"I saw it in your palm pilot."

She smiled shyly over her cheesecake. "Jack usually makes such a big deal about my birthday. He was really put-out I was going to be out of town." She lifted her eyes to smile into his. "This was very thoughtful."

Embarrassed, Logan scoffed, "Just respect me in the morning."

When they de-boarded at LaGuardia, they found Jack waiting for them. He embraced Andi and shook Logan's hand, clapping him heartily on the shoulder. Logan was actually glad to see his grinning face.

Chapter 12

Andi and Jack had to drive right back to LaGuardia the next afternoon to pick up her other son, Alex, Jack's younger brother by her second husband, Danny. Jack and Alex had a ski-holiday over the Thanksgiving break and were leaving first thing Monday, but Jack brought him by the school Sunday night to meet everyone. Logan was quick to notice Alex was shorter than his brother by several inches and stockier with a boyish, freckled face, tight curly blonde hair and a shy, reserved manner. When Andi introduced them, Alex politely shook his hand. "So, you're Logan."

Unable to resist, Logan casually threw his arm around Andi and drew her close, "Your mom and me are like this," and held up crossed fingers to illustrate and was rewarded a surprised look from Alex.

Andi just shook his arm off. "Logan's full of it, babe. Ignore him."

Logan looked at her with mock shock, then smirked. Aside to Alex, he whispered, "Really, she's crazy about me."

Alex just gave him a 'whatever' look.

During dinner, Andi couldn't help but notice the shy looks and flirty smiles Alex and Storm seemed to be exchanging and not without misgivings. It was one thing for Jack to be here, but quite another for Alex to get tangled up in this dangerous mutant business as well. Having both sons here was *not* what she wanted.

Scott was watching Jack and Alex as well, but his interest lay in observing their interaction with Andi. Without much son experience, he thought he might pick up some pointers. Jack's weekly Sunday brunch with her had already inspired him to try inviting Andi to a weekly outing with him and Jean on Friday nights.

As the Thanksgiving week wore on, Logan grew restless. With Jack and Alex out of town, he had plenty of time to work on his old, beat-up Harley twelve-hundred. He also was joint-refereeing with just Andi, the various sport functions over the break-week, though she'd been acting oddly distant and detached ever since their return from Canada and seemed awfully busy with Scott and Jean. It irritated him in a way he couldn't quite put his finger on and tried to ignore.

Andi had good reason to be detached, however. Those few days in Canada had only increased the attraction brewing in her heart for Logan, though she felt fairly certain their relationship goals were entirely incompatible. Jack gave her no details of their night's out, but she wasn't naive. Logan was a wham-bam sort of guy and she just wasn't a wham-bam kind of girl. End of story. Besides with her lifespan, she had lots of time for considering a new mate and wasn't in any hurry.

In the middle of the night on the eve of Thanksgiving, Andi's home phone woke her. Normally, for reasons of security, people she wanted to talk to would page her, then she'd call them back on her cell, so her home phone was for emergencies and unlisted. Groggily, she remembered Jack mentioning that he'd given that number to a couple bar-keeps--just in case Logan got out of hand on his own. "Hello," she mumbled vaguely into the receiver.

A gruff male voice she didn't recognize answered. "I was told I should call you to come get this guy, Logan, if he got rowdy." In the background she could hear lots of noise. "Well, he's rowdy," the voice complained.

Fully awake now, Andi said, "Okay, what's the name of your place and where are you?" She jotted down the information, then replied, "I'll be there as soon as I can." Hanging up, she glanced at the clock. It was almost two in the morning. Jumping into clothes and grabbing her emergency cash, she flew down the stairs and into the garage. Hitting the door opener, she revved the powerful old Firebird to life and sped through the darkness.

When she arrived, she plunged through the bar doors expecting the worst, but only saw a couple pool cues and a chair or two seemed broken. A small group, mostly men, were sitting in an intimidated cluster to one side of the room apparently as far as they could manage to be from the pool table where Logan was playing. The bar-keep stood behind the bar, looking nervous, but otherwise, to her relief, no bodies were on the floor and Logan wasn't flashing claws. He just had a whiskey bottle set on the table edge where he was playing alone with a cigar in his teeth.

"Well" she thought, *"it doesn't look as bad as I expected,"* and walked toward him.

Seeing her, he set his cue stick upright on the floor and leaned on it. "What are *you* doing here?"

"Come to take you home."

He nonchalantly resumed his game. "Who asked you?"

Andi nodded back toward the bartender. "He did."

Logan eyed the man, then shot a ball into a pocket. "Is your number on the bathroom wall or something?"

"Jack arranged for me to get called first---as opposed to the police."

Logan snorted. "Busy-body."

Andi moved next to him and put her hand on his arm. "Come on, Logan. Humor me. Let's get out of here." The pressure on his arm drew his attention and the appeal in her eyes won him. He finally nodded, slowly laid his cue on the table and threw an arm around her shoulders. "Okay. Let's go," he agreed.

Arm around him, Andi guided him to the bar and dumped several bills on the counter for damage. She could hear hoots and clapping follow them out the door, to which Logan retaliated by casting an upright finger behind his back at them.

When they reached her car, Andi unlocked the passenger door and directed Logan into the seat. As he swung his legs in, she jerked the cigar from his lips and crushed it under her heel. "Hey," he protested, but she ignored him and just leaned in to pull the upper racing seat belt over his head, then pull the bottom one up and snap them together at his middle like a baby in a car seat. "Hey" he protested again, "I don't need...." but she'd already slammed the door.

When she hopped in the other side, he grumbled, "What about the other car?"

Andi glanced out the windshield at Xavier's classic fast-back Mustang. "Did you lock it?"

"Maybe," he shrugged. "Maybe not."

With a sigh, Andi got back out, and checked it. It was locked, but would have to wait. "We'll pick it up tomorrow," she said, getting back in.

Logan stared down at the alien seat-belt disapprovingly, then peered around at the old dashboard and modern

stereo equipment. The engine roared to life and he watched her shift gears through town, then onto the highway. He'd never ridden in her car before, though he'd certainly admired it. It was a '68 Firebird Coupe V8 that, according to Jack, they'd just rebuilt for its fourth time prior to joining Xavier.

"Are you mad?" he finally asked, breaking the long silence.

"No, Jack forewarned me. It's just late, Logan."

Closing his eyes and leaning against the head-rest, he suddenly had an idea for some fun with her and smiled diabolically to himself.

At the school, Andi opened his door and released his seat-belt. As soon as he was standing, though, he threw an arm around her and sagged in her grasp, as if drunk. With his regenerative gift, it really took *a lot* more than he'd had to make him even a little drunk, so it was only for effect that he wove to and fro, sang off key and talked loudly.

Andi tried to quiet him. "Sh-h-h-h, people are sleeping!"

He imitated her with a finger to his lips. "Sh-h-h-h, people are sleeping,"

He bumped her gently from wall to wall several times enjoying her valiant struggle to keep him walking straight, though she was certainly much stronger than he expected.

Finally, reaching his room, she flung open the door and flipped on the light switch. He staggered with her toward his unmade bed and, with a calculated twist, collapsed on it, piling her half under him.

"Logan!" she protested in a hushed voice.

He snuggled his face against the top of her head, pretending to snore while inhaling her sweet smell.

She lay still, annoyed, thinking over her alternatives. He was just being obnoxious, but because she'd been date-raped in her youth, this sort of situation was quite uncomfortable. "Logan," she muttered, "you pill, let me up!"

He smiled to himself and made more snoring noises.

With her free hand Andi goosed his side sharply, making him wince, but he caught her wrist and restrained it gently against the bed. He had every intention right then of letting her up, but before he could, someone else grabbed him roughly and jerked him from the bed onto the floor.

"Get off, right now!" a seething voice commanded.

Blood-boiling, Logan sprang to his feet to confront Scott Summers, now facing him in a defensive stance. Fists up, Logan's lips curled into a snarl, but Andi was between them in a flash, holding him back, her hand planted powerfully against his chest, keeping him back.

"Out of my way," he growled at her.

Her eyes stayed locked with his though, like a lioness pitted against a bull. Over her shoulder to Scott, she ordered, "Get out! Now!"

Scott stood his ground, however, indignant with Logan, confused by Andi and angry to be embarrassed in front of both. "Let him go!" he retorted. "The ignoramus needs a lesson in respect!"

Logan made to plunge forward, but Andi threw all her strength against him, holding him back. His eyes blazed fiercely into hers and hers right back. "No, Logan," she hissed. "*Think* where we are. Think what a stray laser might do." She felt him ease off then and she shot a hard look at Scott. "Trust me. Get out!"

Reluctantly, he left.

As soon as the door closed, Logan snatched his arms back and jerked away from her. He ripped off his jacket, hurled it down in anger and stalked around the room, strangely sober. "He had no right!" he griped. "I'd *never* hurt you."

"And if it'd been you who walked in on a scene like that----what would you do?"

He scowled her direction and changed the subject. "I backed off this time for *you*," he emphasized, pointing at her. "Never, *ever* get in my way like that again!"

Andi took a bold step forward, crossed her arms on her chest and, with sparking eyes, replied, "Or what?"

"Something you won't like," he asserted, crossing his arms as well.

She smirked, then wheeled an about-face for the door, only pausing to say, "Good-night Logan. Remember, turkey will be served around two," and left.

Logan stared at the closed door, frustrated and irritated with her, with Scott and with himself. He took a long shower before hitting the rack.

Outside, in the hallway, Andi tried to shake off the mixed feelings close contact with Logan stirred up. Then, noticing Scott, leaning against a window frame with his arms folded on his chest a few doors down, she quietly joined him. They both peered down on the frozen reflection pool glistening in the moonlight below. He took a deep, inward breath. "Was I out of line?"

"You thought I was in trouble," she replied, "It was tasteless move on Logan's part, but it was nothing. He was just playing around." She shrugged. "He's just having an ornery day today, I guess."

Scott snorted. "Duh, when is he not?"

Andi smiled wryly. "Maybe he's got a little cabin fever. You know, he's kind of like an eagle in a birdcage. He's used to being free and now he's captive. I'm sure when he finishes that bike, he'll get away more and that will help."

Scott just shook his head, while Andi studied the frozen pool, stirred by strange confusing feelings this latest encounter with Logan had caused, then pushed them away. "The car he used is still at the bar in Middleburg," she said, changing the subject.

"Ah, so that's where it is." Scott muttered. "Exactly how'd it end up there and him here?"

"Jack arranged for me to get a call if Logan got out of hand at any of their favorite dives."

"Jack's a better friend than he deserves." Scott retorted.

"Maybe so," she agreed, remembering Jack, as a kid, always did have a quirk for bringing home strays and adopting as friends kids no one else wanted. He was generous that way. "Why don't you drive Logan up there to get it tomorrow?" she suggested. "You could use the time to apologize."

He hung his head and groaned. Logan would eat nails before apologizing to him, though he couldn't deny he'd butted-in. Or deny, as leader, he was responsible to keep communication smooth with his team members. Or deny it was his job to assure Xavier's valuable classic got back in the garage. He sighed resignedly. "I'll take care of it."

Andi patted his shoulder and pulled out the wristwatch she'd hurriedly jammed in her pocket earlier. It was almost four am now. She frowned at it.

"You going home?" he asked.

She shook her head, thinking there was no point in tempting bad dreams. "I'm up, I'm here. I think I'll work on the Lady a couple hours."

"Well, since I'm up too, I'll give you a hand."

It was nearly two when Logan finally sauntered into the cafeteria for the Thanksgiving meal. He eyed the crowd milling around waiting for the feast. The fireplace was blazing, a dessert table was piled high and the tables had been pushed together to form two parallel lines of seating in the center of a room over seen by glassy-eyed boar and deer head's mounted high on the wall. Holidays might be meaningless to him, but he'd never pass up food. He'd celebrate anything if he could eat. His eyes fell on Andi then, seated at one of the tables, her chestnut waves hanging loose to her shoulders today, chatting with Elliot beside her. Smiling, Logan strolled to the empty chair directly across from her. "Is this seat taken?"

Andi looked up, noted his scrubbed, shaved and tucked-in appearance and shook her head. He pulled it out and sat, willing to endure Elliot's insipid chatter to sit with her. It was a sumptuous meal and afterwards, students and adults gradually filtered out either to watch football in one room or movies in another. Over coffee, he was struggling to talk to Andi around Elliot and not succeeding very well, when he felt someone behind him and turned to find Scott standing there. His hands were clasped sternly behind him, which usually signified something disagreeable.

"Ya want something, bub?" Logan challenged.

"I thought you and I should pick-up the car you borrowed last night."

Logan stared at him like an alien, then raised a brow at Andi. He'd thought he'd be getting another ride in the Firebird. Andi only smiled sweetly.

"After the game." Scott said firmly, then smiled pleasantly at Andi and Elliot and walked away.

Andi stood before Logan could protest, patted him on the back and to Elliot, said, "Ready to go watch a movie, sweetie?"

Later, while he and Logan were enroute to Middleburg, Scott was trying to figure out how best to approach this subject of an apology, but Logan seemed more interested in passing scenery than talking. He cleared his throat. If Logan heard, he ignored him. "Ah...Logan?"

"What?" Logan snapped without looking.

"I owe you an apology for last night." He swallowed hard. "I was wrong."

"Yeah, and it was none of your business," Logan agreed tersely.

"I apologize."

After a short silence, Logan finally looked at him. "Okay. Forget it."

It didn't create blazing conversation between them, but Scott felt tension ease just a little. At the bar's parking lot, he let him out and waited while Logan lit a cigar and got into the Mustang. When the tail-lights came on, Scott pulled out and headed back, assuring himself he could trust Logan to bring the car directly back.

Unfortunately, Thanksgiving weekend happened to also be Logan's "house-mom" duty weekend, which meant hanging around the school to keep an eye on things. While shooting pool in the rec-room Saturday evening, he happened to see Alex dash by, sharply dressed, headed for the stairs. Nosy, he set his cue aside and sauntered in the direction he'd seem him come from, which was the garage. There he found Jack and Andi standing outside the Firebird, apparently waiting. Logan's eyes immediately fell appreciatively upon Andi's nyloned legs, moved-up her coat covered dress and stopped at her face, her lips glossy and hair held back by a delicate head-band. With a smile, Andi shifted self-consciously under his gaze.

Jack cleared his throat. "Hey, take a picture, will ya."

Logan ignored him. "So, where're you off to?"

"Alex wanted to see New York before he left, so we're going out for dinner and dancing---with Ro."

Logan didn't miss her slight hesitation, but before he could say more, Alex came back with the lady in question on his arm. Storm acknowledged him with a nod as Alex directed her into the back seat, then Andi got in the front seat and swung her legs gracefully in. "See you later," she said, "We'll probably be in to work on Airwolf sometime tomorrow."

"Have fun," he replied, closing her door. He watched Jack back the Firebird out, then went inside again, chiding himself that *this* wasn't the right girl to be getting any ideas about.

Chapter 13

With her adamantium trace fizzled-out, Andi moved on, the dreams relentlessly motivating her to not give up, but that wasn't all that kept her going. It wasn't just a case any more. She cared about it, so she studiously scrutinized the best x-ray magnifications Jean could give her Logan's skeleton, trying to profile what type of experimenter would do such a thing. She figured whoever it was lacked any sort of legal or ethical morals and tried searching through a watch-list of unethical researchers Xavier's FBI friend had obtained for her, looking for possibilities or connections. Even so, she still couldn't shake a sense she was missing something.

As a unit, the X-team usually trained on Saturdays, right after lunch, using the virtual-sim room. There, they practiced strategy and teamwork with a virtual Magneto and company, who, thanks to Andi and Jack, had been elevated to a commando unit with multiple skill levels. Although this served well to fine-tune the team, Andi's gifts couldn't be practiced in a virtual world. So, to sensitize her to recognizing mutant abilities, Xavier had to expose her to them in use. He recruited Jean first and they spent an hour daily letting Andi "feel" Jean telekinetically

moving things. He was encouraged by the results, though he noted with puzzlement that Andi's irises darkened oddly during such exercises.

This particular Saturday, the second weekend of December, was Scott's annual Christmas tree expedition day. After the training session, he asked for volunteers. Much to both Jean and Storm's relief, Jack immediately volunteered himself and a disgruntled Logan. Since Scott forbade smoking in the vehicle, Logan morosely sprawled in the back seat and dozed during the long drive to the tree farm. There, bow-saw in hand, he and Jack trudged through the snow behind Scott as he meticulously inspected various trees.

"Oh, come on," Logan grumbled, "a tree's, a tree. Just pick one."

"You obviously don't know anything about picking Christmas trees," Scott retorted.

Jack just rolled his eyes at Logan, then scooped a handful of snow into a ball and egged him into a snowball fight, leaving Scott to wander about alone---until they decided to track him like prey, but he wasn't much fun. After being pelted with a few, he just told them to "get serious and cut it out."

When Scott finally settled on a tree, Logan ran his eyes up the huge evergreen. "You don't think you could find a bigger one?"

"This one is perfect."

Scott reached for the saw, but Logan held it away. He'd done some lumber-jacking and knew a bit more about trees than One-eye might think. He just told them to "stand back," then crouched under the pine, grumbling to himself. Cutting away some low branches, he sawed neatly through the trunk, toppling it exactly where he planned. It made the trip back tied securely on top of the SUV, then they wrestled it into the stand in the front parlor.

Ordinarily, Logan would have skipped the tree decorating party for the hangar below, except Andi was here and she was far prettier than Jack and smelled sweeter than the cookies he was eating. So, sprawled on the sofa with a handful, he was content to watch Pietro wind lights around the tree in a split-second and Jean levitate an angel to the treetop and Scott try to control how the decorations got distributed. Most of all, he kept his eye on Andi. She might be hands off, but she was still poetry in motion, and, well---he was a connoisseur of such poetry. He observed her whisper something to Jubilee that sent the girl hurrying from the room only to return shortly with a couple CD's she passed to Andi, who promptly ejected Scott's boring Christmas orchestra music and replaced it with her upbeat aerobic Christmas tunes, to the kid's obvious approval. Scott, of course, popped immediately from behind the tree to stare in her direction and Logan watched him alertly, ready to jump in if he so much as dared rebuke her, but aside from Andi's winsome smile and Scott's arched brow in return, nothing happened. He was so intent on this little drama though, he barely noticed Rogue plop on the sofa beside him. "Ya thank she's purdy?" she asked.

That Mississippi twang drew Logan's gaze. "Yeah."

"Ya like her, don't ya?"

He caught the twinkle in her eye and swallowed his mouthful of cookie. "She's a nice lady," he replied, ignoring her little smirk. What did a sixteen year old know anyway?

After two weeks, Andi was adept at sensing Jean's power use and they moved on to Scott. Visor on, he grimly crunched through the snow with her to the back-forty of the estate, where he was supposed to fire around her. Reluctantly, he did so, while she stood still, palms forward and eyes closed, not even flinching. Inside the school, Xavier monitored her training from within her mind, where he could directly discern how she was doing and encourage her where needed. He'd already discovered she had a puzzling spot in her mind he couldn't enter, one she apparently wasn't even consciously aware of or able to access voluntarily. Yet he felt her unconsciously drawing upon that very place during her mental exercises and was convinced she'd eventually break through to consciously access it, though he had no idea precisely how to help her.

By the time Christmas neared, Xavier was beginning to let her practice with various students who had sufficient control and overt powers such as Bobby, John, Kitty and Jubilee. Unfortunately, she couldn't discern non-descript abilities like Rogue's or Logan's.

It was a week until Christmas and Andi and Jack were returning to California for the holiday, but the night before their flight, Andi stopped by the school with a two particular gifts in her hands. She rapped lightly on Scott and Jean's door and Jean beckoned her in. Andi handed her one of the gifts and said, "This is for you and Scott," then handed her a second. "And this one is for Logan. Could you leave it for him on Christmas eve or something? Somehow, I just don't think he's the type to wait for a certain day to open a gift."

Jean smiled, an amused twinkle in her eye. "We'll take care of it," she promised, then they exchanged a brief hug and kiss, but she held onto Andi's hand, looking into her eyes. "Will you still try to see your daughter, even though she's not been speaking to you?"

Sadness crossed Andi's eyes and her smile became wistful. "I'd like to try. Alex will probably arrange something."

Scott offered her their gift and the card he'd carefully written a special note in, then gave her a quick embrace, wishing he knew how to ease her pain. That she had this estranged her relationship with her daughter, Jana was something Andi had only recently confided some of and it astonished him that a child lucky enough to have a mother could throw one away so casually. Andi had seemed uncomfortable telling them what sparse details she had, but had said enough for him to gather Jana's angst was so extreme Andi's Christmas would not be very merry.

Logan dropped Andi and Jack at LaGuardia early the next morning, saying his goodbyes ahead of the security checkpoint, since he didn't have a waiver this time. Then, jumping in Jack's truck, he lit a cigar and steeled himself for the drive through traffic home, glad to have use of a vehicle Scott had no say over for a change.

That same afternoon, Benjamin Weir entered the school vestibule, removed his wool long-coat, shook the snow off, then neatly hung it over his arm. He fastidiously checked his hair in a mirror, flicked some snowflakes off, then wandered out into the hallway. Seeing a couple boys passing, he called to them, "Excuse me, could you take me to see Miss Andi, please?"

They exchanged looks and whispered, then one nodded and trotted off. The remaining boy said, "Sir, if you'll wait here, we'll get one of our instructors to help you."

A few minutes later both Scott and Logan arrived and the boys left.

"How can we help you?" Scott politely asked.

Logan couldn't help but inhale Weir's smelly cologne and eyed him with distaste. Weir was maybe five-ten at best, slender, dark skinned and dark-eyed and as manicured a fop in a three-piece suit as he'd ever seen.

"I'd like to see Miss Andi," Weir repeated.

"She's not here," Logan brusquely replied.

Scott intervened. "And you are..?"

"My name's Benjamin Weir," he replied, digging out a business card and handing it to Scott. "Andi knows me."

Logan, his nose getting stuffier by the second, disliked Weir even more.

Weir asked, "Is she gone for just the day--or longer?"

"For the holidays," Scott answered cautiously, examining the card, then it's owner.

Weir looked disappointed. "Hmm. Then, may I see Professor Xavier?"

"That we can arrange," Scott said, "Follow me." Weir followed him down the hall.

Logan sneezed convulsively several times, loathing the feeling Weir gave him as well as his smell. He slipped into one of the empty rooms until Scott passed by again, made sure the way was clear, then crept to Xavier's office, where he pressed his ear to the door and held his nose to keep from sneezing.

"Well, Mr Weir," Xavier said with forced pleasantness, "what brings you here?"

"Honestly, I came to see Andi, but since she's out of town..." he shrugged. "How's her training going?"

Logan's ears pricked at that, and he wondered how this outsider knew so much.

"Very well." Xavier replied. "She's becoming quite adept at sensing particular mutant powers."

"Good." Weir seemed distracted, letting his eyes roam over the Xavier's assorted angel paintings and shelves of

books. Xavier suspiciously looked into Weir's mind, seeing not only his romantic aspiration for Andi, but an impression of urgency that her personal combat skills should be incorporated into her training so she'd be ready for some kind of testing in the near future, though Weir didn't know any details of when or how.

Weir's eyes fell on the Professor and he smiled like a man holding a trump card. Xavier immediately realized he'd been set up to read his thoughts. Weir then pulled an envelope from his inside his jacket and held it out to Xavier. "Since Andi's not here, would you be good enough to give this to her when she returns?"

"I take it you're leaving now," Xavier said flatly, raising his tone a bit for this ease-dropper's benefit and accepted the envelope.

"It seems I have no more reason to stay, Professor."

When Weir stepped into the hallway, he found no one there. Xavier escorted him to the door, irritated to be manipulated and both heard someone sneezing in the distance.

With his friends gone and school on holiday schedule, Logan did what he could with Airwolf, more on his Harley and avoided Scott's eccentric Christmas festivities altogether. Late on Christmas Eve though, he was surprised to find a gift lying on his bed. He eagerly picked it up. Presents were a thing far and few between. The tag said it was from Andi. He shook it, then ripped it open. It was a box of cigars, the really nice Jamaican ones like Jack smoked. Smiling, Logan set them on the bedside table with a slight regret he hadn't been as thoughtful.

The Sunday after Christmas, he was at LaGuardia waiting for them. "It's about time," he grumbled sarcastically as Jack and Andi approached, then he swept Andi into a bear-hug. "Thanks for cigars," he murmured.

Caught in his arms in so natural a position for kissing, she felt an urge to do just that, but was appalled at herself and just patted his arms. "Well, let's get our baggage," she said quickly, disengaging herself. She used the walk to get her pounding heart under control, though Logan's hug certainly offset her otherwise dismal trip. They recounted a few amusing events, such as Alex's room-mate begging her for a date, but skipped anything about Jana. Logan had other things on his mind anyway.

At Jack's truck, Logan threw him the keys and assumed his usual position against the passenger door with Andi between them, his left arm thrown over the seat back behind her and his right foot against the dash with his knee propped up. He lowered the window two inches. "Some guy came to the school last week looking for you," he announced gruffly as he lit his cigar and exhaled a stream of smoke out his window.

Despite suspecting who it was, Andi played innocent. "Oh really? Who?"

"A guy named Weir. Said he knew you." Logan propped his cigar hand casually on his knee and looked at her with a raised brow.

"I know him," she agreed.

Logan looked toward Jack. "And you?"

"Not personally. I understand he helped Mom re-settle after my real Dad's death."

"But I didn't see him again until he put Professor Xavier and me in touch," she finished.

Logan flipped ash out the window. "So, why is his nose in your and Xavier's training business?"

Andi frowned a moment, then looked slyly at Logan. "Were you ease-dropping?"

He blew smoke out the window and cocked a half-smile in reply.

Andi decided to err on the side of caution. "I'll have to talk to the Professor and find out exactly what the conversation was about."

"We'll just do that," he asserted and had them in front of Xavier as soon as they got back.

"So, did you have a pleasant holiday?" Xavier asked, his voice a bit hoarse from a cold, as they filed into his private living area. In seconds, he communicated to Andi's mind Weir's conversation and his thoughts on her training and future testing, though he left out Weir's romantic notions as none of his business.

Andi arched a brow, but just replied, "So-so," about her emotionally draining holiday as he sat down. Jack sat in a chair adjacent to her, while Logan remained standing resolutely behind them, arms folded stubbornly on chest.

"I understand Mr. Weir was here," Andi prompted, casting a backward glance at Logan.

Xavier nodded as he searched his desktop for something, located the envelope Weir had left and handed it to her. "He left this for you."

Andi accepted it, thinking it probably a Christmas card and laid it aside.

"Who is this guy and why does he know so much about what's going on around here?" Logan impatiently demanded.

Xavier consulted mentally with Andi about a feasible reply for that problematic question, since neither of them really understood exactly *what* Weir was or who he worked for. "Well, Mr. Weir is kind of an independent resource manager," Xavier replied. "He connects people and resources to other people."

"He thought the professor and I could help each other," Andi added, "and that the Professor could help expand my intuitive abilities." She hoped that sounded satisfactory, since she really didn't know quite how Weir knew she had them. She speculated Mr. Lei, who'd taught her some control, somehow might have passed on that information.

Jack, worn-out from dealing with his sister all week, was content just observe this conversational interplay.

Logan scowled. "So what is Weir getting for his trouble?"

"Nothing that I know of," Xavier replied. "Yet," he thought.

Logan stepped around, interrogating Andi and Jack with a look and a raised brow, but both shook their heads. "Come on, you can't seriously believe he's just some kind of good fairy tapping everyone on the head with his wand!" he retorted. "You read minds," he directed at Xavier, "didn't you check his?"

"Yes, I did, and he seems to know nothing beyond the immediate transaction he's providing. That doesn't mean I trust him. I don't."

Mind to mind, Xavier and Andi agreed there were ominous signs of a hidden agenda with Weir or whoever he worked for.

Logan snorted. "I don't like him."

Chapter 14

Andi had barely arrived the next morning before Jean grabbed her and put her to work helping care for students and staff. A virulent flu, with varying symptoms of fever, nausea and congestion had been sweeping the school since Christmas day. Only she, Logan and Jack seemed uninfected, though Logan had fled to the hanger and Airwolf to escape the sounds and smells of vomit, thus leaving Andi and Jack on their own with helping Jean. Xavier kept to his private quarters and the care of his own nursing assistant and Jean pushed herself, despite her own advancing illness, to keep doling out tylenol, blankets, fluids and words of comfort until finally put a hand on her pale forehead and insisted she rest. "You're feverish, Jean." Andi pronounced, then took her firmly by the arm and turned her towards her room. "Time for bed."

"I should keep going," she protested weakly. "I'm worried what effect this fever and any resulting delirium might have on these kids mutant powers. You *have* to keep those fevers *down*!" she admonished as she allowed Andi to escort her to her room.

"Don't worry," she assured her. "If there's any real trouble, I can always round Logan up."

Scott was a blanket-covered lump in the bed. Andi sat on the edge beside him and checked his forehead. It was hot. He'd been among the first to get it and shook her head at Jean.

Scott stirred to see who it was. "Andi?"

Andi tucked the blanket around his shoulders. "Jean's got it too," she told him. He raised ruby-quartz sleeping goggles to peer over his shoulder at Jean, standing on the far side of the bed, then sank back down as if it took too much effort.

Andi chuckled. "All these mutant powers and a common virus wipes you all out." A smile played over his lips. Then more seriously, she said, "I took your Christmas card with me to California and re-read it every day things were bad with Jana. It helped."

Scott extended feverish fingers and gently grasped hers. "She just doesn't know how lucky she is," he

murmured.

Andi smiled and gave his shoulder a final reassuring pat as she stood. "Call me if you need anything," she said to Jean, who nodded.

Jack and Andi *did* manage to get through the next twenty-four hours with minimum mayhem and breaking fevers indicated the worst was over. Jack celebrated by throwing himself on the couch in the Rec-room and falling asleep immediately. That's where Logan saw him when he came upstairs around ten pm to find out how things were faring. He found Andi on the second floor, asleep in a chair in the hallway, her head resting against the paneling. Pulling to her feet, he put an arm around her and started walking her down the hall.

She peered at him drowsily.. "What are you doing?"she murmured sleepily.

"Putting you to bed."

"The worst is over, but I still need to look after the kids..for Jean, " she protested.

"I'll keep an eye on things," he promised and directed her into one of the empty rooms. There, he peeled back the covers on the bed, eased her into it, removed her shoes and tucked her in. Then, sitting on the bed beside her, he pulled off her baseball cap and set it on the bed stand.

"You haven't been much help up to now," she murmured.

"Sorry I can't stand the smell of people puking their guts out."

A faint smile played over her lips. "I suppose with a nose like yours that's an excuse."

He tried to push a wisp of rebel curl that lay on her forehead into place, but it stubbornly resisted and dropped back on her forehead. "When you told me you and your girl didn't get along, you didn't mention she was a holy terror."

Andi's smile disappeared."You've been talking to Jack?"

"Well, more like he talked to me. Your first night back he wanted to go out and drank harder than I've *ever* seen him drink and he talked my head off. Told me all about your girl's tirade at that restaurant."

Andi closed her eyes, remembering the scene: Jana's embarrassed husband, Alex trying to calm her, Jack's stormy silence and her own heartbreak. "Sorry," she said softly, "It's not your problem," then turned over, away from him and closed her eyes.

Feeling dismissed, Logan regarded her back for a moment, somewhat affronted, but then conceded Andi was a private person, particularly about her own problems just like he was about his. So he left her to rest and quietly patrolled the rooms and hallways, keeping an eye on things through the night, pondering the new picture of Andi this added to his mental album. Photo vixen, feisty lion and now alienated mother.

Jack decided that a grand New Year's Eve celebration was in order after such a miserable family holiday and an exhausting bout of flue, so he invited Andi and Logan to a New York nightclub featuring a rock-through-the-decades theme and midnight champagne buffet. By the time they arrived and settled at a table, the gigantic ballroom was already vibrating with a fifty's sock-hop. Logan ordered beer and lit a cigar, while Jack whisked Andi immediately to the dance floor.

As the night wore on, they'd sometimes find Logan at the table exactly where they'd left him when they came back and sometimes not. For Jack, this was no particular worry, since he knew Logan's habits, but when he was gone particularly long, Andi became concerned and used her mental senses to make sure he was still there and safe. He was; she felt him on the far side of the crowd. It wasn't until she excused herself for a bathroom break sometime later that she actually saw him. The restrooms were on the far side of the packed room and she accidentally spotted him as she was returning. He was in a dim corner with a short, buxom girl. Andi didn't know what made her do it. She should've kept walking---but instead she stopped and looked and saw making-out for several heartbeats before she tore herself away. The scene, of course, irritated her in a way she didn't want to own and part of. She might wish for Logan have some interest beyond mere lust, but had to harshly remind herself that was about as likely as her wish for her daughter to be happy to see her.

The club was, by now, throbbing with Latin tunes, so when she got to their table, she promptly invited her son back to the dance floor, hoping to burn off her disappointment in the music and motion. At the first slow song,

however, she rested her cheek against his shoulder, finding comfort in Jack's embrace, though he had no idea she was troubled or that it might be about Logan.

When they finally returned to their table, they found Logan was there once more, smoking and drinking beer as if he'd never been anywhere else. Andi kept her fingers laced through Jack's and steeled her attitude as they re-joined him, keeping up a light-hearted chatter as if nothing was wrong. Everyone counted down to midnight and at the shouts of 'Happy New Year' she and Jack exchanged a quick kiss.

"Don't I get a kiss?" Logan challenged.

Andi was repulsed at the very thought, but then got a wicked idea. Smiling sweetly, she leaned a pucker towards his lips, then, at the last second, veered aside to kiss his cheek instead. Jack roared at Logan's expression and Andi winked as she drew back, immensely satisfied.

Jack stood then, grabbed his jacket and announced, "I'm hungry. Let's eat!" He clapped Logan on the shoulder as they headed downstairs to the buffet. It never occurred to him to think Logan was his mother's problem.

Xavier faced January grimly. It was an election year and while the candidates were jostling for position, negative mutant activity might have a critical effect. He somberly watched news about the FBI apprehending a mutant gang of thieves in Chicago lead by a normal. Two of the mutants were killed. It brought out both the mutant-hate mongers and the mutant-rights advocates in droves to protest. Reports of Senator Kelly being either dead or missing were just now surfacing, which meant Mystique had finished her masquerade and was on the move again. With those things in mind, he focused his team on analyzing the rebel mutant problem and developing control strategies. As expected, Magneto's imprisonment left his little band in disarray, which was the general condition of most mutant rebels who, if they existed, did so in disjointed bands that lacked leadership, finances, organization and equipment. Therefore, as a team, they agreed their target should be locating mutants generating calls to arms, raising finances or attempting to organize effectively and to disrupt such efforts by any means, keeping them scattered and impotent.

As for Andi's training, Xavier spent January trying to help her tap her perceptual abilities more deeply and combine them with her contact combat skills. They focused on agility and recovery. To an outsider it would have looked like perverse Olympic gymnastic training involving leaps, rebounds off objects, twists in the midair and standing drops from heights where she rolled to her feet. Everyday Xavier watched her get better, faster and more accurate, but still she was only tapping the outer-edge of her hidden resources. He wondered, if she was this good using only the fringes of that power, what full access might do.

After a couple weeks, he asked Scott and Logan to spar with her. Logan flat refused, but Scott reluctantly agreed. So, with Andi wearing a fencing mask, Xavier told him to take his best shot, explaining the point was letting her sense and respond to his motions. Scott took a deep breath, then swung. Though, he'd faced her many times in training combat, it still felt uncomfortable. She evaded or blocked his every move and even when his blow actually touched her and that's all it was, a touch, it seemed as if she were already moving out of range. Xavier called a halt after thirty minutes. Hot and panting from the workout, Andi pulled her fencing helmet off as she offered her hand to him and, with a start, he noticed her eyes. To him, they always appeared brown anyway, since his vision and quartz lenses both skewed all color into the red spectrum, but now her irises looked like black moons. A chill ran down his spine and he frowned as he gripped her hand.

"What?" she asked.

"Your eyes---look different."

Andi, after a glance at the Professor, just shrugged. "It's nothing."

As for Logan, Andi saw him at lunches and worked with him and Jack on Airwolf, but she stopped joining him and Jack for Sunday football and pizza. Instead, she spent Sunday afternoons at the school playing games with the kids and having a quiet dinner with Storm, Jean and Scott and kept her thoughts disciplined about Logan, not allowing herself any illusions.

About the end of January, while eating lunch at the staff table, Logan suddenly sniffed, then realized it was a familiar stink. Pinpointing it, he pointed, making Jack peer around to eye Benjamin Weir in dress pants and sweater in the lunch line with Andi and Xavier, but he just shrugged. As soon as they approached the table, Logan abruptly stood and deliberately pulled the chair beside him out for Andi thus forcing Weir to sit next to Jack. This made Scott's fork stopped half-way to his mouth as he stared and Storm cough as water tried going the wrong way down her throat.

"You're back," Logan announced.

"I remember you---but I don't believe I caught your name," Weir politely replied.

"I'm sorry, Ben," Andi apologized. "This is Logan," then she pointed out the others, "and Storm, Scott, Jean and my son, Jack."

Weir nodded at each one, but extended his hand to Jack beside him. "I never met your Dad, but I saw pictures of him. You're the spitting image."

"Thanks," Jack replied.

"In fact, when I first met your mom you were still just a gleam in her eye." Jack just smiled politely. "If I may," Weir continued, "I'd like to take you both out to dinner tonight."

"Yeah, Jack," Logan agreed, "You should go." He hated the very idea of her being out alone with Weir anywhere and was willing to sacrifice a night of carousing to prevent it.

Cornered, Jack swallowed his last bite then smiled politely again. "Sure, that sounds great." As soon as his mom wasn't looking though, he threw an inquiring look at Logan, but he was too busy sneezing to notice. His eyes itching, Logan abruptly left, anxious to escape Weir's cologne and didn't care whether he finished eating or not.

Jack caught up with him in the hanger. With satisfaction, he surveyed the freshly upholstered seats and new custom consoles stacked to one side against the wall awaiting installation, then turned down the music and addressed the platform overhead where Logan was working on an upper turbine, "Okay. So, what's the deal? Is it you don't like Weir or just don't like him hanging around Mom?"

Logan snorted, though his heart pricked him. "You shouldn't let that guy be alone with her. He's bad news."

Jack studied some blueprints nonchalantly. "That's her business, I think."

Logan stopped and stared down, "It seems to me a son should care about that sort of thing."

"You seem to be doing enough caring for the both of us," Jack retorted, amused at his friend's sudden protective attitude. "Besides, I didn't worry about her going to Canada with *you*." Logan snorted and Jack added, "In my family, pal, we stay out of each other's love-lives."

Logan fell silent, arguing irritably with himself, over the matter. Well, maybe he didn't like Andi hanging out with Weir, but told himself it was because he was just looking for her best interests as a friend. *Yeah, that was it*, he thought, *he was just protecting her as a friend*.

Later, while Jack was playing chaperone for Andi and Weir, Logan took off for a drink or two on his own, but feeling restless and distracted, just ended up coming back early and working on Airwolf till late.

The next day, he was leaning on Jack's doorbell by mid-morning. "What?" Jack grinned, letting him in. "Here to collect all the grisly details already?"

"So, what'd you find out about Weir?"

"That he has one of those nice, electric-turbo Jags," he replied, sauntering into the kitchen. "Coffee?" Logan followed him impatiently and accepted a mug of black coffee while Jack rambled on, "He's a lawyer. Self-employed---no firm or partners. He lives in Arlington, Virginia in a three-story townhouse. Never married. Owns his own jet. Likes antiques." He shrugged.

Logan digested Weir's apparent entrepreneur status, still unable to believe he was a lone do-gooder in the mutant cause.

"Oh," Jack added, just to twist the knife, "and he took Mom to breakfast this morning--without me."

Outwardly, Logan shrugged it off while inwardly, it pricked his heart. "She must be glutton for punishment," he grumbled.

"Oh, I don't know," Jack replied, enjoying his pal's apparent dis-ease. "To me, he might be boring, but Mom might find him perfectly charming--who's to say?"

Logan scowled into his mug, while Jack filled the sink for dishes, smiling to himself. He wasn't worried about his Mom and Weir. He didn't seem her type, but it amused him to see Logan so bothered about it. Not that he thought Logan had much of a chance either. The hoser would have to make some serious changes and he didn't seem that happening anytime soon.

Chapter 15

Valentines Day brought a flock of flower deliveries to Xavier's School for the Gifted. A dozen red roses arrived for Storm from Alex, putting her on cloud nine for the rest of the day, something Andi just observed without a word. Another dozen came for Jean from Scott and finally, for Andi, a vase overflowing with fragrant Stargazer lilies came from Benjamin Weir.

Logan found her toting the huge vase down the hall and took it out of her arms. "Hey, where you going with this?"

"The vestibule"

"Whose are they?"

"Mine."

He was immediately on the defensive. "Who from?"

"Ben "

Logan made a face behind the lilies. Their strong scent was already burning his nose and making his eyes water, so he was only too glad to set them on the console in the vestibule and step away. "This seems like a funny place to put your boyfriend's flowers," he sarcastically observed. He was gratified by a disdainful look from Andi.

"He's hardly *that*."

She left the vestibule and he fell in beside her. He thumbed back in the flowers direction. "Looks like a hint to me."

She sighed, "Yes, well I suppose it is. I think he'd *like* me to be interested."

Surprised by her candor, itching curiosity drove him to dig for more. "Are you?"

"He's nice enough I guess, but I can't say I'm attracted to him. At least, not right now."

He didn't like hearing that. "So, the door's still open?"

Andi shrugged. "He's pretty big into the Washington social-scene and I don't think playing prima donna hostess exactly fits my style."

"You're right--I can't picture that," he willingly agreed.

"Besides, I love the kid's too much to leave."

"And Weir wouldn't fit here."

"Well, you know how it goes---guys who think they're in love, think they can do anything."

They parted then, each to their own destinations, neither particularly comforted by that conversation.

It was near the end of the month before Logan caught wind of Weir again. He'd just come in from a late motorcycle ride, when his sensitive nostrils detected traces of Weir's odious cologne in the hallway. He'd seen Andi's car in the garage, but that wasn't unusual. She often stayed late, but Weir's scent being here stood his neck-hairs on end. Like a bloodhound, he followed the scent outside, to the locked outer doors of the gymnasium and pressed his ear to them. Something was going on. Doubling-back through the indoor pool-room, he cut through the men's locker room that linked the two buildings and hugged the shadows along the wall. What he saw going on in center court made him freeze and his fists clench. Andi was furiously fighting some kind of invisible opponent, while Weir, hunched like a coach, watched from the bleachers on the opposite side. She was wearing

her new team uniform comprised of a protective, sleeveless, X-team style vest over black, bloused military pants. He stared, hearing the impact sounds of blows being exchanged, his eyes barely keeping up with the speed she was firing kicks and punches. He watched her suddenly hoisted aloft by the invisible assailant and thrown only to twist cat-like in midair, hit the mat, roll and come to her feet. He didn't know how long they'd been at it, but could hear them both breathing pretty heavily and Andi seemed to be catching more blows.

He gritted his teeth as he watched her get knocked into some weight equipment on the sidelines, but she rolled away and came to her feet, only to catch another blow that sent her reeling to the floor again. From there, she quickly blocked the next blow, rolled to her feet, then took another hit that cast her floor again. Logan glared at Weir, angered he made no effort to intervene. This wasn't a fight cage. He heard a little yelp and looked back in time to see Andi miss the mat and land instead on the hardwood floor. She was rolling back and forth, evading blows he couldn't see and he'd seen enough. Blades burned through his skin as plunged onto the court with a roar of rage and leapt over Andi to assault her invisible assailant, whom he could both smell and hear. Coiled for a strike, he zeroed in on him and slashed across the air. "How about picking on somebody your own size!" he snarled. He heard his opponent backing off and followed him, slashing across the air again and again, trying for a hit. Drops of blood, like bread-crumbs on the floor, evidenced his success.

On the floor behind him, Andi lay face down, gasping for air, trying to getting her breath back, her head throbbing.

"Stop!" Weir shouted, leaping off the bleachers. To the unseen mutant, he ordered, "It's over. Get out of here!"

Logan stared after the retreating smells a moment, then realized Weir was headed for Andi. Retracting the blades on his left hand, he got there first, blocking Weir, then snatching him the lapel with his left, held the blades still out on his right against Weir's throat. "I don't think so," he growled menacingly. Weir's closeness made his eyes itch and water all the more, only increasing his irritation.

Weir blanched and swallowed hard, not daring to move. His eyes flicked nervously upward to the sound booth.

Logan gave the booth a quick glance, then increased the pressure of his blades against Weir's skin, eyeing him narrowly. "Show's over, bub," he hissed. "I don't like you. Your friends. Or your smell. I want you out of here. Now!" And he shoved Weir hard, sending him staggering backwards.

Weir angrily straightened his jacket and after a reluctant glance at Andi's prone form, retorted, "You think there won't be mutants like you on the other side? She needs to be ready."

Logan held his blades up for Weir to see. "She won't be alone."

Stale-mated, Weir stalked off, collecting his overcoat from the bleachers along the way.

"Don't let the door hit you on the way out!" Logan shouted after him. "And don't let me see your face around this school again!"

Retracting his blades, he rubbed his knuckles, then knelt by Andi, who still lay prone on the floor. "Andi," he murmured, gently gripping her shoulders to help her up. Blood was running from her nose down her lip and her bruised cheek and black-eye stunned him. She gripped his arm as he helped her to her feet and led her to a bleacher.

"Sit here. I'll get a paper towel...or something." He hurried into a locker room and brought back a wet towel along with some dry ones, then handed them to her. "You're...bleeding," he said, gesturing at her lip.

Andi took the towels and dabbed her lip, looked at the blood with a raised brow, then pressed it to her nose to stem the flow, muttering, "I can already feel the aches and pains I'm going to have tomorrow."

"Come on," Logan said, pulling her to her feet and putting an arm around her. "We need to have Jean take a look at you."

He took her down to Jean's medical lab, then called upstairs. Hitting the button that raised the exam table, he scooped Andi into his arms and laid her on it.

"I'm all right," she protested.

"Then you must feel better than you look," he retorted.

She half-smiled as her hand went to her forehead. "I have such a headache."

Jean walked in, wearing sweats, her hair clipped up. "What's the problem?" she demanded before seeing Andi's

face, then as soon as she did, she became professional, tenderly tilting Andi's face around, shocked. "Who did this?"

"Weir," Logan replied, "actually some invisible mutant of his. I saved her."

She frowned at Andi. "So why'd you let Weir use you for a punching bag?"

"That's what I want to know," Logan added, crossing his arms on his chest.

"It was a test of my abilities to sense and anticipate another mutant's actions." Andi explained. "I agreed to it."

"Let's do a full body scan," Jean said, hitting the scanner table's extend button.

"She usually makes me take my shirt off for this," Logan remarked as he lifted Andi from one table to the other. To Jean he said, "Can I stay and watch?"

"You're really full of it," Andi retorted

"And you're crazy for agreeing to anything Weir wants to do," Logan threw back as Jean sent her into the machine fully clothed.

Once out, Andi sent Logan to fetch her gym-bag while Jean finished her exam, so she could change. Jean diagnosed her with no more than some deep bruising and prescribed rest and a follow-up checkup the next day, so she could chart her recovery speed. Both Jean and Logan insisted she stay in a spare room upstairs rather than go home and Logan escorted her. Andi gladly leaned against his strength as he guided her upstairs, then down the hallway, her headache only just starting to respond to the meds Jean had given her. He tucked her in, turned off the light and left her to sleep in peace.

Jean, of course, told Scott as much as she'd seen and knew about what had happened to Andi and aghast, Scott immediately had to see for himself. He quietly let himself into her room and stared in dismay at the dark bruising, black eye and swollen lip visible to his eyes even in the dark. Seeing her so hurt hurt him and as often as he disagreed with Logan's rash actions, this time he was grateful. He slipped out as quietly as he came, certain he despised Benjamin Weir.

Jack arrived in the morning worried he hadn't heard from his Mom. He'd known she was going to test her combined mental-physical combatant ability. She'd told him. On the way in, he'd even checked by her house, but she hadn't been there, so he expected her to be, here, at school. Wading through the hallway rush of students hurrying to their first class, Scott caught his eye and gestured he should follow him. He took him to Andi, then stayed to observe his reaction.

Jack gently lifted the covers enough to see her face and studied her injuries with consternation. Though, he knew she was currently in a healing-sleep and would wake-up looking better than she did now, seeing those bruises still made him feel bad. He hadn't anticipated the "test" would be so costly, but he reminded himself it'd been her choice.

Walking back to Scott, still by the door, he exhaled a deep sigh. "Well, I guess I'd better put something up here for her to eat. She'll be famished when she wakes up." Then as they went downstairs, Jack asked, "How much do you know?"

"That she was fighting an invisible mutant and Logan broke it up, then got her to the medical lab."

Jack frowned, but said nothing else.

When he strolled into the gym around nine, coffee in hand, Logan found Jack working up a sweat shooting hoops and sat on a bleacher nearby. "Seen your Mom yet?" he ventured.

"Yep." Jack put the ball neatly through the hoop.

"She still asleep?"

"Yep." He sank another. "She'll be okay."

"Okay?" Logan snorted. "Have you any idea what Weir was doing?"

Jack put the ball under his arm and faced Logan. "Sure. She told me."

"She told you she going to let an invisible mutant pulverize her!"

Jack shook his head. "No. Just that she expected Weir to challenge her to see how her training was going."

Logan stared incredulously at him. "You knew? And you didn't go and keep an eye on Weir? Are you crazy? Maybe you should go upstairs and take another look at your Mom's face!"

Jack cast his eyes down, bounced the ball a couple times, then looked at Logan squarely. "You know, I wish I could be with Mom every minute to protect her, but I can't. And I have a news flash for you, buddy---no matter what you think, neither can you. So, if what Weir's doing will give Mom a better fighting edge to defend herself against God-knows-what-kind-of-mutants, then I'm all for it!"

An unspoken, "*and you should be too*," seem to hover heavily in the air. Logan had expected an "atta-boy" for rescuing Andi, not this. Offended by Jack's rebuke, he irritably changed the subject. "So, what's today's agenda?" Being Friday, he expected a co-ed activity.

"How about line-soccer?"

Logan shrugged. "Whatever you say, Yankee-boy."

Logan was still disgruntled with Jack when they joined everyone at the staff lunch table. Storm immediately assaulted him with questions about what really happened last night, while Scott and Jean looked expectant. He shot Xavier an accusing look before answering, "Look, I found Weir in the gym pitting Andi against some invisible mutant. She wasn't doing so hot and since it didn't look like Weir was planning on doing anything to stop it, I did. That's it." Then he focused on eating.

Scott studied Jack, also sullenly eating. "And what do you think?" he probed.

Jack set down his fork. "Listen, you guys don't know Mom---she'll go where angels fear to tread, and though I'd like to think you all will be with her, you just won't be able to be there every second, no matter how much you want to. So, I agree she needs some kind of defensive edge. And if she and Weir are convinced this is how to do it, then I'm behind it."

Logan humped, while Jack quietly resumed eating.

"I think," Xavier said quietly, his eyes indicating the room full of children, "we should keep this conversation to a minimum. Her appearance will prompt enough questions."

Softly, Jean said, "Maybe not so much. I looked in on her before lunch and she's healing remarkably fast. There'll probably be scant evidence of her ordeal by tomorrow night."

Silence followed this pronouncement.

Quickly finished, Logan rose briskly to clear his tray and leave. Scott abruptly left his lunch to follow him out into the hallway. "Logan--wait up a minute."

Logan stopped and turned a suspicious eye on Scott. "What?"

"I wanted to say thanks for pulling Andi out of there last night. I'm glad you did." And he extended his hand, unsure Logan would accept it now anymore than when they first met.

Logan's brows shot up in surprise at this unexpected support from his greatest critic and, after a pause, he gripped Scott's hand in return. Then Scott went back to finish his lunch, while Logan headed for the hanger to work on the Lady, mystified by this turn of events.

Jack joined him later and they worked together, barely speaking a word. Eventually, Logan told him he couldn't cruise bars tonight because he had some things to do and Jack agreed he did, too. They didn't notice Andi come in until she turned down their music. "Hey, guys."

They looked down on her from the platform where they were, working on the last upper turbine. Logan was surprised at how true Jean's prediction was. The bruises on Andi's face had turned from fresh purple to a pale green in fourteen hours with only her left eye still retaining a purplish tinge.

"How's it coming?" she asked.

"Should be ready for test-firing next week," Jack replied, forcing cheerfulness. "Did you find the sandwiches I left for you?"

"Yes, honey. Thanks. I was starved when I woke up."

Logan just listened, keeping his attention on his work. The intercom buzzed and Andi walked back to get it and had a brief conversation he couldn't quite make out, then came back and stood below them.

"Jack, honey, could I use your cell? I left mine in the car."

"It's on the table," he replied. She found it, flipped it open, switched it on and rapidly tapped buttons, then listened. "Ben, it's Andi," she said.

Logan's ears pricked up. After a long pause, he heard her say, "Much better." Then another pause, followed by several "Uh-huhs", then finally she said, "Alright. I'll meet you there at six-thirty. Okay. Yeah. Bye." He couldn't believe she was even going to talk to that jerk after last night and it rankled him.

Andi folded the phone shut and laid it on the table. "I'm going home. I guess I'll see you two tomorrow."

He and Jack echoed their goodbyes after her as she walked toward the doors and with a wave she was gone. Logan withheld the spew of acidy things he really wanted to say about Weir and worked stoically on the turbine, looking forward to cruising the town by himself.

It was around eleven that night when Andi's house phone rang. "Hello?"

"Uh, your friend Logan needs picking up again." She recognized the Middleburg bar-keeper's gruff voice.

"Is this Grodin's Brewery?"

"Yes, ma'am."

"I'll be there as soon as I can." And she hung up, glanced at the time and dashed out to her car puzzled, wondering why she should be getting a call when Jack was normally with him on Fridays. But, she admitted there was no rule that said they had to be together every Friday either.

She arrived at Grodin's, which was busy with a small crowd. She glanced around and saw Logan hovering around a jukebox blaring rock n' roll and him singing badly with it, whiskey bottle in hand, but she didn't see any damaged furniture or people. She went up to the barkeep at the counter. "So, what's he been doing this time?"

"Some guy wanted to play a country western song and he didn't like it. I was afraid he was going to take my machine apart. Hasn't let anyone near it since."

"Do I owe you anything for damages?"

He squinted suspiciously and gestured at her face. "Say, that guy didn't do that did he?"

Andi's hand reflexively went to her face. She's completely forgotten the bruising. "Actually," she replied, "he's the one who saved me from the the guy who did."

That seemed to put him at ease and he jerked his head Logan's direction. "Just get him out of here."

Andi nodded, walked over to the jukebox and leaned against it, facing Logan who was once more less intoxicated than obnoxious. "So. Here we are again," she said.

He jerked his head back toward the bar. "He call you?"

"You knew he would."

Logan only took another swig from his bottle and smirked.

"Come on. Let's take you home." She took his arm. He set the bottle on the jukebox and walked willingly with her out to the car. Just as she opened the passenger door, he said, "Wait a minute. My helmet." and fetched it from his motorcycle, then slid into the front seat, plopping his helmet on the floor between his feet. She flipped the upper seat belt over his head, but he waved her away. "I'll do it," he told her grumpily, fishing around the floor for the other half.

Andi left his door open, got in her side, buckled in, revved the engine to life while he finished buckling in. In these close quarters, that sweet scent her skin seemed to naturally radiate was easily inhaled and, normally, he found it soothing--if Weir weren't on his mind. "So you saw Weir tonight," he announced flatly.

"I did."

"Whatever for?"

"Business. He talked to me about how the test went and I talked to him about getting Airwolf's ammo."

"How the test went?" he snorted. "Did he give you a good grade?"

Sparing his cynicism a brief glance, a smile crept to her lips. "I haven't thanked you for coming to my rescue, have I? It was a good thing you did. I was definitely ready to quit. Thank you, Logan."

He shifted in his seat, uncomfortable with the boost of appreciation that gave him.

"As for the test," Andi went on, "I discussed my evaluation of my performance and what I learned with him--not the other way around."

"Did you mention he should've stopped things sooner?"

"Dinner was his apology for that shortcoming."

"Humph. And you buy that?"

"You're just jealous," Andi tossed back.

Logan snorted. "Did he happen tell you who that guy was he had up in the booth watching?"

Andi's brow furrowed slightly. "No. Are you sure there was someone there?"

"Yeah."

She quietly thought that over adding it to her list of suspicions and making a mental note to tell the Professor.

"The truth is, Logan," she explained, "Weir isn't going away. He's a middleman for us and for better or worse, I'm his connection. He works for anonymous people though, which puts us all in a dangerous position since we don't know their motives or agendas. If you want to hear me say I don't trust him, then here it is, I don't trust Ben. I didn't even meet with him alone---the Professor was outside. He was with me in mind, listening to everything. Feel any better?"

He really didn't. He just grunted uncommittedly and changed the subject. "So he can get whatever ammo Airwolf needs?" He hadn't thought that far ahead and, of course, Airwolf was no good without armament.

Andi nodded. "I gave him her specs. And I even gave him a heads up about Alkali Lake, in case he could use that. He said he'd take care of it."

Logan mulled that over, knowing perfectly well military class armament wasn't a dime-store item.

"Just think of him as a necessary evil," Andi said, tapping her code into the security box at the school gate.

Logan snorted and wrinkled his nose. "I'd call that stink he wears evil. He must take a bath in it."

Andi shot a glance his direction. "You should talk. You smell like burnt laundry doused with whiskey."

Jolted, he retaliated with a smirk, "You're crazy about me."

"In your dreams," Andi lied as she pulled into the garage and stopped.

He released his safety belt, then gave her a coy look. "So, you're not going to walk me in?"

Andi shook her head, remembering last time. "I think you can make it."

He started to get up, then sat back again. "Oh yeah. My bike. You will be taking me back to get it this time, won't you?"

Andi shrugged. "Sure. What time?"

"Come by around eleven. I'll buy you lunch." He hopped out, closed her door and, with a wave, sauntered in.

Andi shook her head as she backed out. It didn't seem the right time to mention she and Weir had already tentatively scheduled another future "test." It would be off campus this time and, at Xavier's prompting, she'd demanded her own observer as a pre-condition. Like it or not, she had a sense that if Logan knew, he'd insist on being that observer.

Continued in Chapters 16-20...