

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

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Chapter 21

For Xavier's few boarding students, June first meant summer vacation and going home, but for the remaining majority, it just meant a more open curriculum. PE was extended to two hours in the mornings and they had options to pursue art, music, special science projects, literature, horseback riding, tennis or any other interests and, for those turning sixteen during the next school year, a drivers-ed course.

More importantly, it meant Airwolf's first official shakedown flight. The night before, all the staff, including Alex, gathered in the hanger to celebrate the moment. Xavier passed Jack a bottle of champagne to do the honors with and popping the cork, he generously spattered Airwolf, filled everyone's glasses, then proudly raised his own. "To the fastest helicopter ever built," he said. "May she keep us as safe as she strikes terror into the hearts of our enemies." His toast was followed by a round of "here, here's."

"And may she not blow up in our face," Logan ruefully thought, not entirely happy Andi was the one test flying her.

Andi took only a sip of champagne, then passed her glass to Jack to finish, noting as she did the twinkling excitement in his blue eyes and heightened glow. He had his real father's same heedless, 'I can surmount anything' attitude, that same 'on the jazz' enthusiasm and, for a moment, the recollection filled her with bittersweet memories.

Early the next morning, Scott opened the hanger and Jack, Andi and Logan watched it roll back, revealing a dark, pre-dawn sky. Logan walked them to Airwolf, envious of their two piece-uniforms, which were comprised of black military style trousers topped with a quilted X-uniform style vest worn over fire-resistant nomex turtle-necks and black baseball caps on their heads. Much better than the leather jump suit the rest of them wore, which Scott had taken the liberty of ordering an entire *set* of while he was at Alkali Lake. He'd griped to Xavier about it, but this complaint only got a pragmatic, "We have to use what we have first," in reply, though he fully intended to wear his out as soon as he could.

Airwolf's door hissed as he opened it and held it for Andi while she slipped into the pilot seat and traded her cap for the black flight helmet. "Well, this is it," she said. "Wish us luck."

Not wanting to let her go, he procrastinated, letting his eyes roam around the cockpit fragrant with the smell of new leather while Jack settled into the rear engineers seat from the other side and put on his helmet. The instrument panels lit as soon as he sat. "Ready?" he asked.

"Ready," Andi replied, then arched a fine brow at Logan.

"Good luck," he grumbled reluctantly, closing her door, then ran to join Scott against the wall.

"Clear," Andi said, then, "Contact." She switched the ignition on.

As the turbines lit and the blades picked up speed, Logan and Scott soon found themselves plastered against the wall by Airwolf's powerful down-wash. Watching them lift-off, was like squinting into a hurricane and the roar of her turbines still loud to Logan, despite the ear-plugs he wore.

Inside Airwolf, Andi ordered, "Silent mode," and the helicopter floated out of the hanger softly as a whispering wind into the night.

Andi kept them below radar and as soon as they were a safely away from town, ordered 'silent mode' off. "Shall we to test our invisibility?" she asked.

"Roger. ASPJ and IR Jammers all green light," Jack replied.

Andi increased altitude. "If they can, they should see us now."

Jack watched his readings carefully. "Negative contact," he reported. "We're clear."

"Let's try starlight amplification, while it's still dark."

"Roger."

A projection on the forward windshield presented a starlight enhanced image of the landscape ahead of them, then after several minutes, Jack turned it off. "Starlight amplification good to go."

"Weapons check," Andi ordered.

Jack deployed the side-mounted chain guns and cannons, then the ADF pod below. Andi closed her face-shield and she swung her head side to side checking the missile pod's responsiveness.

"ADF responsive" Jack reported. "Chain guns and cannons hot."

"Transferring," she said and tapped a keypad, transferring weapons control to her station, which, in the absence of an engineer, would enable either her or Jack to deploy their own weapons and operate primary systems. A green light indicated everything was at her fingertips. She tapped another keypad that ordered the guns and pod to retract.

"Guns safe," Jack reported.

"Roger. Transferring back." Andi tapped a keypad and a red light indicated all systems were returned to engineering control. "Taking it to the ceiling," she said, drawing back on the stick between her knees and sending Airwolf into a rapid ascent.

"Pressurizing," Jack murmured, studying his data as he monitored Airwolf's automatic pressurization systems and oxygen. "Oxygen system functioning normally."

Andi leveled at sixty-five thousand feet, hovering and allowing them to survey the hazy blue marble of Earth far below several minutes before plunging downwards and leveling off again at twenty-nine thousand. "Well, that just leaves one thing," she said, knowing this was what Jack was looking forward to. "Standby for turbo ignition."

Jack grinned inside his helmet. "Roger," he said and tapped in the nav-coordinates Xavier had given him. First to New Mexico. More than just a shakedown, they had a surveillance mission on two potential mutant problem spots Xavier had confirmed with Cerebro where large clusters of mutant minds were frequently converging. One was an abandoned refinery in the Dallas region and Dagon's mutant survival camp in southern New Mexico, ironically near Roswell.

Andi compressed the turbo-button on her control stick, which disengaged the regular rotor system and firing the thrust boosters fired, jetting them forward at high velocity. Those boosters could provide forty-five thousand pounds of thrust, that if absolutely necessary, would allow them to out-run an F15. Airwolf was also able to fly to a higher altitude and enjoyed a greater maneuverability.

Jack gave a low whistle. "Whew---almost mach two!"

"That's all she's got with this payload." Andi replied. "With one pilot and stripped of weapons she can get a little better than two-point-five."

Jack gave another low whistle. Fortunately for them, though unfortunately for the US Government, Airwolf was considered *lost* technology. Her original designer took his twisted genius to the grave. He'd left all Airwolf's technical specs locked in her own hard-drive and she'd shot down the only other proto-type ever built years ago.

She was one of a kind now and forever.

Once they neared their destination, Andi cut the turbo and re-engaged the rotors to normal flying speed. Hovering high above their New Mexico target, they gave it the full surveillance treatment, which included video, photo, infrared and doppler. The matrix scanner constructed a 3-D image of the facility below and the heat signatures of the individuals in and around it. They did the same over the abandoned refinery in Texas, then flew home.

Andi used a burst of turbo briefly to help shorten flight time but generally flew Airwolf's standard three-hundred knot speed. Switching to silent long before they neared Xavier's estate, they approached low and from the southwest, skimming along the tree tops beneath a dull, overcast sky, then opened the hanger and slipped back inside delicately as black ghost. It was barely midmorning.

Putting down in the hangar, the door hissed as Jack hopped out, then ducked the slowing blades and chocked the wheels, grumbling about the 'lack of ground crew'. Andi removed her helmet, replaced it with her cap, then

hopped out greet the Professor, who'd arrived just as they'd shut down.

"How was it?" he asked eagerly.

"Great! Everything works great!"

Jack joined her then, handing the Professor a flash-drive stick. "It's all here, Professor."

Logan snorted with dissatisfaction when he strode into the cafeteria for lunch only to find Andi and Jack lounging at the staff table, their feet propped on chair seats and empty food trays pushed aside, idly chatting with Xavier. They made room for him as he approached with his tray.

"What time did you get back?" he demanded grumpily.

Andi traded an amused glance with Jack, then shrugged nonchalantly. "Around eight-thirty or so. Maybe nine."

Logan scowled. "And you two stayed in here goofing-off the whole time I was outside running a double gym class by myself?"

Jack grinned. "Quit whining, hoser. You can handle it."

Logan snorted and pointed his fork at Jack. "You owe me--big time, Yankee-boy."

Listening to their good-natured raillery brought a smile to Xavier's face. He watched contentedly as his children and remaining staff filtered in raising the room's volume to a crescendo of chatter. Alex came in with Storm, greeted his mother with a kiss, then gave Jack a hearty slap on the back before re-joining Storm in the lunch-line.

As his staff settled at the table, they were naturally curious to know how the first flight went, but Xavier temporarily quelled their questions, "This is not the time or place---we'll meet downstairs at seven and discuss everything."

Chapter 22

At seven, everyone, except Alex naturally, who remained upstairs shooting pool with some students, was seated around the map table in the underground mission room. Xavier and Scott had previewed the flash-drive contents and now replayed them for the entire group, then Scott dictated their plan of attack. "Our objective right now," he reiterated, "is only to disrupt threatening mutant solidarity and eliminate their resources." He pointed to an isolated spot on the map that lay like a 3-D miniature of the refinery and surrounding region. "We'll land the jet here," then, at his touch, it reshaped into an open model of a building and he pointed-out the areas of most concentrated activity. "Then we'll scout these areas on foot and get rid of any provisions or munitions. We're looking at around twenty mutants, so we'll take our new tranquilizer pistols and sedate any we run into. That should keep pandemonium to a minimum. Airwolf will do the follow-up surveillance and we'll judge how we did. After that we can move on to the next project in New Mexico. Questions?" No one seemed to have any. "Okay then," Scott finished. "Report to the hanger at ten tonight, ready to go."

Everyone filed out then except Jean, who patiently waited for him. He shut down the map table somewhat troubled by a little nagging voice in his mind. Not about Jack or Airwolf really, but about Andi. It was the nagging voice of habitual doubt and distrust telling him something was bound to come along to ruin the mother-son deal they had. Sometimes he had equally bad doubts about Jean. Particularly after observing her talking and laughing with Logan or Jack or catching either of them ogling her pretty legs. Even though she faithfully wore the engagement ring he'd given her or frequently assured him she loved him and even if he honestly believed it ninety-five percent of the time, it was that last five-percent that still niggled at the back of his mind. It liked to suggest that, since Jean was four years older, she might actually prefer one of those older, wilder guys. Of course, he kept this to himself. It was his problem. Besides, expressing distrust every time he felt it would be the surest road to drive her away and create exactly the abandonment he feared.

In the corridor, Logan tagged after Andi and Jack. Pointedly to Andi, he said, "So, you'll see us off tonight, right?"

Sure," she smiled. "We'll be bringing Alex down to see Storm off anyway."

Jack just rolled his eyes.

That night, from the cockpit where he was doing final pre-flight checks with Jean, Scott observed Andi, Jack and Alex saunter into the hanger, then Storm come into his range of vision from beneath the jet, running eagerly into Alex's arms. Jack and Andi stopped beside Logan, who'd only just arrived himself.

"So," Andi said to Logan, "this is it. Another team night on the town."

"Yeah," Jack added. "And try not to trash any more national monuments while you're at it, eh?"

Logan only smirked, his glance following Andi's toward Storm and Alex wrapped in each other's arms, exchanging kisses and whispers. When Andi she turned back, she met his eyes gazing warmly into hers with that quirky, brazen smile of his. It took her breath away, but before she could think any more about it, Scott called his team to board.

"See you later," Logan said, moving away.

"Be careful," she called back.

Logan gave her a mock salute before disappearing up the jet's gangway.

In the corridor outside the hanger, Andi, Jack and Alex heard the jet rumble softly out of the hanger into the night.

"You know," Jack remarked, "you're supposed to teach me how to fly turbo anyway---who says it couldn't be tonight or that we couldn't coincidentally end up over Dallas..."

He got a rebuking look for his comment and sighed in resignation. He loved to fly. He'd practically grown-up in Uncle Dom's and String's air service and knew how to fly before he knew how to drive, which was a point where he and Summer's differed. Summer's flew out of necessity, but for him it was a passion. He and Andi returned to the mission room to wait, though even if they'd gone, it wouldn't have changed a thing.

At the abandoned oil facility, the X-team crept like shadows through the darkness. Scott signaled they should split up and, gripping their small tranquilizer pistols, the girls broke off together, while he and Logan took separate directions. The jet's doppler indicated numerous mutants were up and around despite the lateness of the hour. Logan proceeded cautiously, his pistol in one hand and his claws out on his other, just in case. The pistol was non-metal containing a clip of four potent air-driven darts and he had a spare clip with four more. Xavier had given them two simple rules. One, be within twelve feet of the target and, two, don't expect the sedative to last long, since the exact duration of effect might vary from mutant to mutant. Logan could only shake his head over how complicated these geeks made things. Suddenly he froze, sniffing the petroleum tinged air, then he spied his target and fired a dart. One hiss and whoever or whatever it was dropped like a tree.

Scott was on his second clip by the time he reached his target area, which was the stronghold's computer room. Plastered against the wall, he peered cautiously into a crudely lit room where a single young female was seated with her back to him using a computer. Stealthily, he entered, carefully aimed and sent a dart hissing into her shoulder, tumbling her promptly to the floor. Surveying the three antiquated computers, he quickly gave the two inactive ones a laser meltdown, then turned his attention to the one the girl had been using. Pushing her chair aside, he laid his pistol on the table and tabbed eagerly through what was on the screen. Mostly e-mails. Deciding to download it, he reached for a box of old-style discs without noticing the mutant at his feet was stirring or seeing a barely perceivable radiance beginning to emanate from her. Raising her head and arm ever so discreetly, she extended a whip-like energy from her fingers that spiraled loosely up Scott's left leg. Then she sat upright, snapping her energy coil back like a rope so it tightened on his leg and tugged, dumping him onto his back on the floor with startled out-cry.

Everyone heard him in their ear-mikes. Logan, who was busy placing thermal charges in the munitions room, froze.

Scott quickly aimed his visor at the red-glowing woman, since his pistol was out of reach on the table above him, and fired, but to no avail. She just absorbed it and burned brighter as did the spiral on his leg. Before it had only been tight, but now it grew hot and, if he struggled, it just tightened more.

"Who are you and why are you here?" she demanded harshly.

"Help!" Scott gasped hoarsely to the others.

"I'll get him," Logan announced, already on the move. "Jean, Storm--finish up whatever you're doing then get to the jet."

Scott could smell his leather uniform burning as the energy spiral seemed to be melting into it and could feel a growing heat, though he hoped his nomex lining would hold out a bit longer. "Hurry!" he hissed through clenched teeth.

For Logan, the building was like a maze. He made a wrong turn and had to back track, swearing all the while, but Scott was too busy screaming to notice, as the energy spiral was sizzling flesh.

"Who are you and why are you here?" the mutant demanded again. "Talk or lose the leg."

That's when Logan charged into the room, blades flashing.

"Shoot her!" Scott croaked, "my laser's won't touch her!"

"Can't. Out of darts," he tersely replied as he dashed toward the surprised mutant. Forced to release Scott to defend herself, she switched to a crouch and whipped hot spirals from each hand around Logan's forearms and wrists to hold him off. Snarled with rage despite feeling the heat, he lashed out with all he had, even aiming a kick at her stomach, but he only managed to graze her and didn't persuade her to let go.

Scott took advantage of the moment to drag himself close to the table, balance on his good knee and snatch-up the hypo-pistol he'd foolishly left there.

The spirals on Logan's arms were fast burning through his uniform into his flesh and he could smell it, the pain enraging him all the more as she held him powerfully at bay. Scott aimed and fired, hissing first one dart into her chest, then another. His last two. Her glow slowly began fading and the spirals disappeared from Logan's arms as she finally toppled over, asleep. Logan sank to one knee, his teeth clenched in agony as he waited for his healing to kick in, sick to his stomach from the smell of his own burnt flesh.

Scott, still crouched on one knee, finished what he'd set out to do. He loaded a disc and down loaded everything he could, hoping something worthwhile might be there. By the time he ejected the disc, Logan was rising to his feet, his uniform sleeves in tatters, but his the flesh on his arms, fresh and new. Scott snatched the box of discs and tucked the prize under his arm.

"Enough fun for today," Logan said as he retracted his blades, then helped Scott to his feet, looping an arm around him to keep him steady on his feet. In his ear-mike, two the voices were squealing to know what was going on and he just said, "I've got him. We're leaving."

Supported by Logan, Scott stoically braved the hike back to the jet where the women anxiously waited. Logan sent them up the gangway first, then followed with Scott, helping him hobble up the steps. At the top, Jean helped guide him to the deck, then examined the blistered flesh. Logan left her to it to join Storm in the cockpit, where she was preparing to fire-up the jet and take off.

"Are ya gonna be okay flying this thing?" he inquired cautiously, since he'd hadn't seen her fly it before.

Storm's white hair shimmered as she nodded her head. "I *know* how to get us home."

He wasn't immediately reassured. Her motions, as she adjusted this and that, had a nervousness to them that suggested she was less sure than she sounded.

She paused to peer up at him as if perplexed he was still there, then frowned slightly. "You'd better buckle in," she ordered firmly, then returned her attention to the controls.

Hearing the turbines fire, he did as directed. As soon as they'd lifted off, he compressed a detonation button, eliminating the refinery's munition stash.

Jack, Andi and Alex were in the mission room playing cards when Storm's voice came over the radio. "We're coming in, one code red," her voice announced, meaning there was one medical emergency on-board. Andi mentally alerted the Professor and he hurried down to prepare the med-lab, while they dashed to the hangar with a canvas stretcher on top of a rolling gurney.

Andi tossed Alex her car keys as they went. "I know you wanted to see Storm, honey," she said, "but----"
"I know," Alex finished for her. "Just tell her I'll see her tomorrow." At the hangar entry, he gave her a peck on the cheek.

"I'm outta here, too," Jack announced. "You know this isn't my cuppa tea."

Andi nodded, knowing he'd seen more than his share of casualties during the war and Jack and Alex left her to wait for the jet's arrival. She didn't have to wait long and as soon as the turbines cut, she hurried the gurney to the rear of the plane. When the gangway lowered, she hurried up the stairs with the canvas stretcher. Logan met her and together they moved a groggy Scott onto it, hustled him down the gangway, arranged him on the gurney, then Jean and Storm seized it and rushed him to the lab. Andi followed and Logan automatically went with her, going because she was. On hindsight, if he'd thought about what he was doing, he probably wouldn't have.

When they reached the lab, Xavier was already there and Jean and Storm quickly transferred Scott, stretcher and all, directly to the exam table.

"Get his uniform off," Xavier barked, starting on his boots.

Storm grabbed a pair of bandage scissors for herself and one for Logan, which she thrust into his hand. "Here," she snapped, "make yourself useful," and began cutting Scott's uniform upwards from his lower leg.

Jean had already removed his gloves and had slit open a sleeve, exposing his arm and was busy raising a vein for an IV.

Andi grabbed some round gauze pads, commanded Scott to close his eyes, removed his visor and quickly bandaged them safely closed, then picked up scissors and started on his opposite sleeve.

Logan just stood there staring queasily at the scissors in his hand, the smell of burnt flesh still thick in his nostrils until he realized Andi was struggling with the thickness of Scott's uniform. Laying the scissors aside, he extended a single blade partly from his fist and, pushing her gently aside, carefully, but efficiently split Scott's uniform the rest of the way open, meeting Storm at the hip. They peeled it off, except for the portion still surrounding the burn, leaving Scott in his t-shirt and skivvies.

Logan averted his eyes from the wound, the smell making his stomach tumble as he wished very much to bury his nose in Andi's hair just to smell something else. He looked toward her.

Andi met his gaze and, seeing his pallor, decided he probably should be somewhere else. She took his arm and gently guided him to the door. "There's nothing more for you to do here. Go on."

And, just like that, he was out. Relieved, he hurried away to get some fresh air before he *did* lose his cookies.

Jean gave Scott something to knock him out, then she and Xavier and Jean set to work on his wound, removing the remaining uniform with an enzyme spray, then examining the extent of the damage. It was at that point Andi also left, since she was access personnel. In the white corridor, she stretched out with her mind to find Logan, located him, then went upstairs to join him. Peering through the front door panes, she saw him lounging on the porch, barefoot in jeans and t-shirt, his back to one of the brick walls that lined either side, one foot on a lower step and his other knee up, fingers laced around it, his head back and eyes closed. She opened the door.

At the sound, Logan pried his eyes open to see who it was and seeing her, closed them again. He felt her sit near him, on the next step up. "How's the kid?" he asked.

Andi rested her back and head against the walls rough surface, letting her eyes close. "They're working on him. The Professor will call when they're done."

Neither said anything else and he felt oddly content, sitting like this with her, the summer night breezes mixing pleasantly with her sweet smell.

It was some time later when Andi was startled awake by Xavier's voice in her head, making her jump, which startled Logan as well. She checked her watch. An hour had passed. "They're done," she told him, heaving herself to her feet and stretching. Then she patted him on the head. "See you later," and went in.

Stretching lazily, Logan decided he'd wait a bit longer for things to settle down before going in. He'd already made up his mind he was going to skip PE and sleep in. Yankee-boy owed him.

Chapter 23

Andi had offered to pull the first watch over Scott, so Jean might get some rest. Xavier had given her a light sedative and sent her to a spare room for an undisturbed night's sleep while Andi sat in the rattan chair by Scott's bedside, where he lay still blissfully unconscious. Andi surveyed the familiar corner suite Scott and Jean had cleverly converted into a cozy studio apartment. There was a small microwave, mini-refrigerator and a tiny dinette in the corner nearest the bathroom and, in the opposite corner, a love-seat generously loaded with pillows on an oriental rug facing a compact entertainment center. The bed was arranged kitty-corner in back corner of the room, where the windows met, and on either side of it were night tables stacked with books reflecting the tastes of each reader. Some related to classes, but Jean's leisure reading included suspense fiction, while Scott apparently liked investment and biographies. She sighed, gave the half-empty IV a quick glance, then opened her crossword book for the long vigil ahead.

Several hours later, Scott woke, his hand automatically going to the bandages that covered his eyes. "Jean?" he murmured.

"She's asleep in another room," Andi replied.

He knew that voice, felt a weight sit next to him on the bed. "Andi?"

"Yes. Ready for your glasses?"

He nodded, then felt the cold metal of scissors against his temple. Snip. The bandages came off and he felt his quartz sleeping goggles slipped into place. Opening his eyes, he saw her and, though Jean had described her to him, he still wished he were able to see her normally. Suddenly, he remembered what he wanted to tell her. "Andi," he whispered intensely. "I brought back a stack of computer discs." His brow furrowed suddenly and he peered around, confused, "I don't remember where they are---maybe still on the jet."

Andi knew he was still in a morphine blurr and patted his arm reassuringly. "Hush, now," she murmured, "I'll take good care of those. Don't worry." He relaxed, his ruby-quartz lenses intent on her. He was due to turn twenty-five in a month yet seemed to her as burdened as a sixty year old man. His childhood had not been a carefree one. He'd been comatose for a year after the plane accident that had killed his parents and it'd taken two more years for him to re-learn how to walk, talk and basically function again when he woke up. Scott was a survivor, though, and the Professor had certainly brought him a long way since he'd been in his care. Xavier had helped him learn anger control and some basic re-parenting, though, because of his abandonment history, Scott still had severe issues with trust, relying on others, relationship expectations, expressing needs and over-achieving. Things no amount of mothering at this late date could erase. On discussing these things with Xavier, he'd made a profound confession to her about her effect on Scott, telling her of Scott's apparent willingness to let her 'in' to a degree he'd never allowed him or perhaps even Jean. Andi noticed Scott had drifted back to sleep and checked his IV. It was nearly empty. It was also the last. Trying not to disturb him, she uncovered his arm, gently removed it, put a band-aid over the spot, then carefully recovered his arm. "You're more important than computer discs," she whispered, then shifted back to her chair, overcome with the sad irony that Scott was more interested in her as a Mother-figure than her own flesh and blood daughter. Jana had started 'disowning' her when she was in her teens and it was a bitter fact she'd quit spending tears on long ago. With a deep sigh, she turned again to her cross-words.

The light was just becoming gray when Jean came in, still bleary eyed from the sedative. She stood looking down on Scott while Andi prepared to leave, then unexpectedly threw herself into her arms. At first surprised, Andi just swayed back and forth, trying to comfort Jean with a rocking motion, one hand finally stroking the back of her auburn head. Suddenly, Andi found herself mentally connected to Jean, able to feel all her current anxiety over Scott, then jerked back, pushing Jean away from her and severing the connection. They stared at one another incredulously.

"What just happened?" Andi asked

"I...I don't know," Jean stammered. "For a moment, we were..."

"Connected," Andi finished.

"Perhaps your telepathic abilities are stronger than you thought."

"Or maybe it's because *yours* are," Andi countered.

Jean's brow furrowed.

"I'm going home to bed," Andi announced, though Jean was too preoccupied with her own thoughts to do more than nod, so Andi left and called Jack as soon as she got home so he'd cover PE for her.

At six that night, Andi's doorbell unexpectedly rang. She'd only been up maybe an hour and, setting her coffee aside, muted the television and went to the door. She peered through the peephole to see who it was and was quite astonished to see Logan's face, particularly since it *was* a Friday night. She opened the door and ushered him in.

"What's up with you?" she asked as she closed the door and followed him into the living room, where he remained standing, like he didn't intend to stay long. "Not out with Jack tonight?" she inquired, just to make conversation.

"He's on a double date with Alex and Storm."

"I should have known. With that girl from the grocery store?"

Logan shrugged and let his eyes roam around the room. "I guess."

"Did you want something?" She prodded, a tad impatient to know why he was here.

His eyes fastened on her. "I was gonna ride up to Newboro and grab some grub. Wanna come?"

She was still wearing the sweats she'd slept in and wondered how he always timed it that way. "Sure," she smiled. "Just give me a minute to change."

"We're going on the bike," he warned as she was dashing up the stairs.

Ten minutes later she was back down, suitably dressed in jeans and a leather jacket, ready to go. Outside, he handed her his spare helmet, put on his, then straddled his Harley and started it while she hopped on back, then they zipped away. She used her legs to steady herself, like riding a horse, and rested her hands lightly on either side of his waist for balance, though she very much longed to wrap her arms around him and hug him tight. She didn't even ask where they were going and just enjoyed riding through the golden rays of sunset on curving back roads into Newboro, where he selected a surf and turf type restaurant to pull into.

Despite the busy Friday night crowd, they were seated pretty quickly and after ordering their steaks, a beer for himself and an ice-tea for her, Logan lit up a cigar. The waitress returned with their drinks, and, over the top of his mug, he noticed Andi's quietness. It didn't strike him as the good kind, but rather a preoccupied kind that meant something was bothering her. So he asked and listened to her generally gripe about Alex and Storm's relationship and the risk it would expose him to, especially if he decided to marry her. Logan carefully exhaled smoke away from her and asked, "Didn't you say your kid was a sheriff or something?"

Andi nodded.

"Isn't that inherently dangerous work?"

"Well...it can be a little risky, yes."

"Did his becoming a lawman worry you?"

She squirmed in her seat. "That's different."

"How?"

"It just is."

He could see he wasn't going to get anywhere. "He's a grown man, Andi," he told her. "You should trust him to weigh the risks and make the choice that's right for him." The food came then and, being satisfied he'd solved the problem, Logan exhaled a last stream of smoke, snubbed out his cigar and dug in.

Andi stared at her food, disgruntled with being given a solution she wasn't ready for and with her own irrationality about Alex and Storm. So, she changed the subject. "So, what exactly happened to Scott last night?"

Logan recounted the events as he knew them. "I guess the hypo just wore off faster than he expected," he summarized. Their waitress delivered him a second mug of beer and, after thanking her, he shook his head. "That

burn's gonna to be a rough road. Makes me glad I'm put together like I am."

"Too bad we can't just inject Scott with your DNA." Andi replied lightly. Then her brow furrowed and her smile faded.

Logan paused, watching an alarmed kind of inspiration light her face. "What?" he demanded.

Andi had just realized what she'd been missing about Logan's case all along. "I've been looking at the wrong end," she exclaimed softly. She leaned her forehead against her hand, unable to believe she could've been so dense for so long. "I can't believe I didn't see it sooner! It's not the result--it has to be the process!" She raised her head and met his eyes. "That's the only way everything else makes sense!"

"What are you talking about?"

Andi scanned their busy surroundings, then leaned closer. "We can't talk about it here," she whispered.

Logan scowled in frustration. She switched topics and he had to wait until he brought her home to find out what she was talking about.

He flopped into her easy chair as soon as they walked in the door. "Okay. So now tell me."

Too excited to sit down, Andi paced back and forth as she explained it. "We've just been looking at you as if *you*, with all this adamantium, were the whole goal, the outcome they were after. But what if it wasn't?" He arched a brow. She suddenly plopped on the sofa near him and leaned intensely over it's arm at him. "*What* if it was *something else*? Something more? What if it wasn't just about putting something *in*? What if it was also about taking something *out*?"

Baffled, Logan struggled to follow her. "Put in adamantium and take out...what?"

Her eyes sparkled with excited intensity. "What is it that makes you a mutant, Logan?"

"My ability to regenerate." His eyes suddenly narrowed. "You think they took that?" Then he snorted. "What for?"

"Because it's a fountain of youth for one thing and worth a fortune if it can be replicated."

He just laughed.

Andi straightened and jabbed an accusing finger his direction. "Well, if this is all they got for their investment, they sure wasted their dime!"

The smile fell off his face.

"These guys weren't fools," Andi went on, "You can bet they harvested *something*. DNA maybe, I don't know. Something." She tucked her legs up and settled back into the sofa, her mind busily working these new ideas.

"If DNA's all they wanted," Logan grumbled sarcastically, "then why do I have this adamantium lining?"

"A test, maybe."

"A test? What the heck for?"

Andi looked at him again. "Well---maybe just to see what they could do, how much they could do and if you'd survive them doing it."

He was starting feeling a little aggravated. "I coulda guessed that much," he snorted.

"I think it was the procedure they were *actually* experimenting on," she replied. "You were a by-product, though I'm sure they had some sort of use for you in mind. You know, waste not, want not." She observed his scowl and shifted around to lean over the sofa arm towards him again. "Listen, the facts may sound insulting, but I've got a hunch these guys were really playing around with cybernetics of some sort, here."

"Cybernetics?" he repeated. "And that is...what exactly?"

"In this case, incorporating mechanical technology into a human being. I think with you, because you can regenerate, they wanted to see how much could be implanted and how your abilities would cope, because if you lived through it and it worked, then they were in the money. Though, obviously something happened to cut you loose---maybe before they could study all the side-effects. Who knows."

Logan snorted at that, though, however reluctantly, he was caught up in her theory.

"Even so, what they accomplished gave them a precedent. They found out they could modify a human with regenerative abilities with technology. But regenerative mutants aren't a dime a dozen. You're one in a million, but

with a truckload of your DNA, well, maybe they could re-reproduce that trait and create a customized work force."

Logan stared at her, aghast. "Do you know what you saying? Your talking about a new kind of slavery."

She nodded. It *was* horrible. "And with the technology available today, the possibilities of what they could implant would be endless and so would the profit."

Logan's mind was reeling with the implications, but he could see it: designer humans suited for mining, deep ocean exploration, space exploration or even soldiers. He shook his head, still unwilling to believe it. "Even if we're talking about mutants here, selling people is still illegal most places in this world."

She propped her elbow on the sofa arm and rested her chin in her palm, mulling that bit of truth over. "That's true--for now. They'd definitely need a world climate disposed to mutant exploitation in order to market their product. We're not talking about an ethical bunch of guys. You know as well as I do money can buy a lot of blindness. Definitions can be changed. Human rights denied. They're out there somewhere, trying to tip the scales their way."

Logan suddenly scoffed. "This is just theory! It's been almost sixteen years and I've haven't seen any yet!"

"Maybe," Andi agreed, "but it could explain why no one's hunting for you. You don't matter, not when they already have the golden egg and can make a ton of you. I'm no bio-engineer, but isolating and reproducing that trait successfully would probably take some time and if it worked, the off-spring would have to be still be pre-adolescent."

The word 'off-spring' gave him a jolt. He'd always been so cautious, never ever wanting some girl to stroll up to him and, say, "Hi, remember me," and present him with a child. "Are you saying these might be...mine?" he stammered.

"God forbid anyone clone you!" she laughed. "If they were smart they'd isolate the gene and just add it to an independent embryo."

He snorted at this crack, but regardless of who's progeny they were, he hated the idea of anyone ending up like him. "Can we track them down before they reach the implant stage?"

"I don't know," Andi sighed, dropping her hand from her chin and shrugging. "Maybe, if we could locate them. They could be scattered around the world some way, since a commune would be a little obvious. Maybe in a couple years, when their regenerative traits start showing up and we might either spot reports of miraculous recoveries or the Professor might find some with Cerebro we can follow up and save."

"That's a lot of maybe's," he said. He left shortly after that, disturbed in mind by her theories and, as always, disturbed in heart by her company.

Chapter 24

The next day, around noon, Logan rapped on Scott and Jean's door. Jean opened it and ushered him in and he went directly to Scott, who was seated in their tiny corner dinette in shorts and a t-shirt, his bandaged leg propped on another chair and a cup of tea in front of him. Scott offered his hand and Logan clasped it. "Thanks for coming to my rescue the other night," he said.

"So. How's the leg?"

"Tolerable."

Feeling awkward, Logan sought for something to say. A glance out the window at the sunny blue sky gave him an idea. "Say, we're framing the new gym today and Jack's busy taking Alex to the airport---how about moving outside and giving me a hand supervising the kids?"

"That's a good idea," Jean echoed pleasantly, eager to see Scott do something besides mope around their room.

"I might," Scott agreed.

"Well, I'd better get out there before they start without me," Logan said to excuse himself, then with a polite nod to Jean, left thinking how ironic it was that Jean seemed so bland to him now. Why did his heart drift toward women who were always unattainable in some way? Now it was Andi. Last time he'd stayed on Jack's couch, he'd had a quiet little talk with that hollywood photograph. He'd told its black and white face to "Stop looking at him

like that. That he was a guy with no past and no future and who couldn't possibly ask anyone to share it. He just couldn't." But her photograph always remained unrelenting to his explanations.

A short time later, Jean helped Scott settle into a chaise lawn chair in the shade of a large oak in sight of Logan's student crew hammering away on the framework of the new boxing gym. Logan, tool belt slung on his hip like a gun-fighter, moved along the studs making sure things were getting done properly, construction having been one of his many temporary trades.

Suddenly Logan heard Jack's booming voice and looked toward it, his gaze landing instead on Andi walking beside him her white-flowered broom-skirt swirling above bare, sandaled feet and chestnut waves of hair bouncing along the shoulders of her white, sleeve-less vest. To the nearest youngster he said, "Keep up the good work---I'll be right back," then slid through the studs to converge with Jack and Andi by Scott.

"Hey, hoser," Jack greeted as he peeled off his shirt, tossing it over the back of an adjacent lawn chair.

"Get the kid off okay?" Logan inquired. Andi nodded and Jack just rolled his eyes as he buckled his tool belt on and headed off to join the students.

"Look on the bright side," Logan said, "you'll be getting a new daughter." He wisely stopped short of adding "*who likes you*", though he thought it.

Andi just smiled tolerantly and turned to Scott. "This is nice, being outside."

"Logan's idea. He suggested I come out and help him supervise."

"That was very nice of Logan," she replied, re-warming to him and letting her eyes look into his.

Her enchanted gaze stirred such a flutter of conflicting feelings within him, Logan felt compelled to escape on some half-witted sarcasm. "You *could* take your shirt off and join us," he offered, grinning brazenly.

She regarded him in a less-than-enchanted way. "You could use a new line," she replied tartly.

"Ya can't blame a guy for trying," he rapped, then sauntered back to the work site wanting to slap himself. He couldn't believe such stupid dribble had just come out of his mouth.

Scott couldn't believe it either and could only look after him, shaking his head.

"So, when's the mission-debrief?" Andi asked.

Inwardly, Scott cringed. He'd been dreading that question. "Monday night," he replied reluctantly, unable to see any way to put it off longer. It meant confessing how his careless handling of his tranquilizer contributed to his injury. "I'd appreciate you looking over those discs before then."

"Consider it done," she replied, patted his shoulder, then left. Scott watched her walk away hoping some good might come of them.

Andi, however, wanted to see Professor Xavier before doing anything else. She called to him mentally and he directed her to the stable where she found him on horseback in his special high-backed handicapped saddle, instructing several students in riding. Normally, Jolene, an animal telepath, supervised all school animal care and riding lessons, but because she a boarding student, she'd gone home for summer vacation. Scott usually assumed her duties, but with him convalescing, Xavier was happily filling in. Andi stood by the fence, watching him walk his dappled gray toward her, thinking there was no end to what that man could do. When he reached her, they exchanged some pleasantries about her son's departure before she got to what she wanted to tell him. She reiterated her theoretical conversation with Logan about long-range cybernetic development as a possible explanation for Logan's case.

Xavier heaved a deep sigh. "It's more feasible than I'd like to admit," he grimly agreed. "And all for the love of money." He shook his head. No doubt she was right about such specially bred children being scattered both to hide their numbers and their regenerative abilities when they appeared. He was sure, too, it would only be matter of two or three years at best before they'd begin appearing and they'd know for certain. "It's just another thing to watch," he said.

Andi just nodded, twirling straw through her fingers, still thinking about her theory's dark possibilities.

Xavier moved on to a more pressing topic. "I have something of a favor to ask you."

Andi dropped the straw and met his kind, gray eyes.

"Tomorrow will be Scott's first dressing change. I'd like you to meet him when we're done and see him back upstairs---around seven-fifteen or so."

"Sure," she agreed. "What's up?"

Xavier felt words too clumsy just then and opened his thoughts to her, letting her see how grievous Scott's burn care was even to him, though he assumed responsibility for it to spare Jean. He thought her meeting Scott would make it that much easier on Jean and he was sure she'd be a comfort to Scott at such a moment.

To his mind, she replied, "*I understand. I'll be there.*" Then, out-loud, "Well, I have some discs to look through. See you later," and sauntered back to the main building. There, she went directly to the hanger and retrieved the box of discs Scott had so carefully brought back. "I sure hope you're worth all this trouble," she ruefully told them as she took them to the computer lab and looked through them. They were about a dozen old-style round CDR discs. Many were blank. Really, the good stuff, if there'd been any, probably would've been on the hard drive, but that hadn't been the mission. She found some games. There was an inventory of supplies, which she printed a hard copy of for the debrief. She perused an accounting sheet of their finances, which were minimal and unrevealing. Then she pulled up the e-mails Scott copied and read through them. They were personals from someone named Sylvia to her parents and a child in their care with many vague hints of a hopeful financial change in the future and being together again. The fearsome mutant attacker was a *mother*. Andi back-tracked the receiving address to a small town in Oklahoma, located the family's name residing there, scribbled it down and, later, took it to Xavier.

Logan idly blew a blue band of smoke toward the rows of liquor bottles in front of him. Jack was on a bar stool beside him, likewise enjoying a cigar. He'd talked him into going for a couple beers even though Logan wasn't exactly in a bar-hopping mood. Unexpectedly, cool fingers suddenly covered Logan's eyes from behind and a female voice chirped, "Guess who?"

Irked, Logan clamped his cigar between his teeth and removed her fingers, not liking guessing games. Then drew her around to where he could get a look at her, but didn't recognize the young woman.

She said, "Logan, right?"

He nodded. She obviously knew his name.

"We..uh, hooked up back in January sometime."

He arched his left brow and tapped cigar ash into the ashtray, vaguely remembering.

She giggled. "Well, after that I had a boyfriend, but we broke up last week. So here I am...and since I saw you here---well---I just thought maybe...we could get together again?"

Her hand reached toward his head as if meaning to caress his hair, but he caught her wrist. He had rules and one of them was no reruns. Sex more than once was a relationship. Snubbing out his cigar, he abruptly stood. "Sorry. My pal here," and he rapped Jack's arm, "and me, were just leaving." He let her go then, ignoring her downcast looks.

Agreeably, Jack spun off his stool to his feet and they walked out, going only one other place before Logan called it quits and Jack dropped him back on school grounds. He didn't feel up to dealing with Andi's photo at Jack's tonight and just tramped upstairs to his room to read.

Early Sunday morning, Professor Xavier greeted Scott cheerily as he hobbled on crutches into the lab in t-shirt and swim trunks with Jean at his side. She laid his change of clothes on a table, kissed him and left. He'd had his dose of pain medication about forty minutes ago and was as ready as he was ever going to be.

Xavier had him sit down and with precise efficiency, unwrapped the white surface bandages down to the bio-synthetic dressing underneath, saying, "I want to show you some areas of this burn I'm concerned with. You'll probably feel some pain when I remove this."

Scott swallowed and nodded.

Xavier quickly sprayed the bio-synthetic with a enzyme spray and toweled it away, leaving the burn open. As air hit sensitive exposed nerve endings, Scott inhaled sharply and swore, then forced himself look down at the raw

red spiral of burnt flesh that began just above the boot line on his left calf, circled over his shin, around behind his knee, up over the top of his lower thigh, then around the back of his upper thigh twice. It ranged from a little wider than half an inch to very thin, whip-like line. Suddenly the room spun. He felt the Professor grip the back of his neck and bend him forward, then he smelled the acrid scent of ammonia.

"Stay with me, Scott" Xavier urged gently.

Scott jerked upright again, nauseated and with tears from the ammonia burning down his face as he listened to Xavier explain his burn and point out where it might require grafting and the special care the back of his knee would need. After that, he was in the whirlpool for a soak, then out for another spray that felt like a thousand hot needles as it cleansed and debrided, then a rinse, then a new bio-synthetic dressing. He gritted his teeth through the entire ordeal, the pain medication being next to useless.

Finished, Xavier left Scott to change clothes and hummed past Andi waiting patiently in the hall, giving her a nod.

Exhausted physically and emotionally, Scott finally hobbled slowly out the door and paused when he saw Andi, surprised she was there. "What are you doing here?"

"Just here to make sure you get back upstairs alright," she replied cheerfully as she came to his side.

"I'm okay. You don't have to."

She could tell by his tone he wasn't. "Humor me."

He surrendered himself to her company and she stayed with him to his room, where Jean waited, hot tea ready for him. He passed on the tea, however, preferring to go directly to bed. They got him settled, then Andi went home to meet Jack for their weekly Sunday brunch together, looking forward to enjoying an afternoon alone afterwards.

She didn't know Ben Weir was waiting in the wings with other plans, that he'd driven to Westchester and was parked far enough down her street so he could see her driveway, yet remain inconspicuous.

Weir was a bit uncomfortable playing private detective, but after last weekend's pool party fiasco, he was determined to see her today away from the school environs--and Logan. Because he already knew she and Jack breakfasted together on Sunday's, he'd arrived early, in time to see Jack pick her up, then kept busy with paperwork until he brought her back. At least, he hoped he'd bring her back. They could have other plans, but that was just a risk he had to take. As it turned out, it was his lucky day. Jack dropped her off about eleven-thirty, then promptly left and Weir kept busy another thirty minutes just to make his appearance seem more coincidental.

When her doorbell rang and Andi saw Ben through the peephole, she was immediately disappointed having automatically expected it might be Logan. Warily she opened the door and ushered Weir in. "Isn't it a bit far from Arlington to keep popping up like this?" she remarked as he walked past her.

Weir surveyed the decor of her living room. It was a little spartan for his tastes. The furnishings were simple. A sofa and easy-chair were centered on a nice stone fireplace and on the walls was one rather fine Impressionist painting that seemed incongruent to the rest of the decor and portraits of each of her three children. One of Jack in his Marine dress blues, one of Alex in his deputy uniform and one of Jana with her thin and swarthy intern husband, Tom Brookston, whom she'd met at UCLA, dropped out to elope with and now worked to support. He knew these things, not because Andi had told him, but because it was in his files. Andi also had a nice entertainment center, an acoustic and electric guitar, each on stands and numerous house plants decorating tables and plant stands everywhere.

"The truth is, I never left," he confessed, turning to face her. "I stayed in Westchester hoping I could make up for my bad behavior." He smiled sweetly.

"I did want to talk to you about that," she agreed slowly.

"Any plans for this afternoon?"

She hesitated, reluctant to admit she didn't.

"We could take a drive, have a cup of coffee and talk about my bad behavior and anything else you want."

Well, she did *need* to tell him to stop showing up at Xavier's and since he'd brought it up... she nodded and allowed him to escort her to his jeep.

As soon as they were on the road, he said, "I'm sorry about last weekend. I was wrong to barge in on you like that and you have every right to be angry."

Andi chose to skip discussing any feelings on the matter and went to the point. "Ben, I don't want you *ever* showing up at Xavier's again without my invitation or my permission."

"Agreed." He offered her his hand to shake, but she just looked at it.

"You promise?" she asked.

"Of course."

She shook his hand then, uneasily hoping his word was good and disliking his hand's clammy feel. After that, he strolled her through a couple antique shops before taking her to a quaint Westchester coffee shop that served wonderful desserts. Then he walked her through another assortment of the town's many shops and boutiques, which was pleasant enough, though she wasn't as big on shopping as he seemed to be. He kept her out all afternoon, listening with apparent empathy to anything she was willing to talk about and making her uncomfortable sometimes asking questions about things she didn't remember telling him. He pressed her to accept a dinner out, too, and she did, not only because she was foot sore, but because her day off was obviously completely blown for anything else. When her meal came she found herself toying restlessly with her food, half-listening to him, her thoughts wandering to Logan. Ben seemed companionable, cultured and a connoisseur of things ranging from antiques to wine. He might even share her long lifespan, but he just didn't fan the flames of her soul quite the way Logan did. "*As long as Logan's around,*" she told herself, "*you're just not going to consider anyone else, even if all you ever do for the next five years is love him from afar.*" This admission surprised her, so much so she flushed warmly and suddenly raised her eyes, a smile filled with secrets playing along her lips.

Ben, saw it and, imagining he was the cause, launched into another witty story.

After dinner, Andi was eager to get home and, as soon as Weir dropped her off and drove away, she got in her car and drove to the school to find Logan. During his visit, Ben had also informed her the next training test was already set for early July and as grumpy as she knew that news would make Logan, it was best to tell him. More than that, she just needed to be around him. After a dull day with Ben, Logan would make her feel alive again. He wasn't hard find, either. She saw see him tinkering on his Harley when she drove into the garage.

He didn't even look up when he heard her pull in. He knew her car by it's sound and didn't look until Andi was standing over him.

"Logan, I need to talk to you."

That made him look up. He heaved himself to his feet and wiped his hands on a rag, frowning at her intense expression. "What's up?"

She gestured toward the open garage door. "Could we walk?"

"Sure." He tossed the rag on his bike.

They walked out into the sultry night air, the sky was still tinged with purple in the dying rays of sunset. He let her wander them a fair distance on the stone path wound through most of the estate grounds before asking again. "What's so important? Did something happen to one of your kids?"

She shook her head, hesitant to say what she knew he'd hate. She sighed.

He gently took her by the arms and turned her to face him. "You're driving me crazy. Out with it."

"I've agreed to another test. And it's soon."

He released her like he'd touched a snake and she could make out his scowl even in the dark shadows of the trees. He threw his arms up and paced around in a small circle, running his hands through his hair in utter frustration and swearing under his breath.

"You remember I said I'm supposed to bring an independent observer this time?" she asked.

"Yeah," he grumbled.

"I thought you'd want the job."

Logan stubbornly folded his arms against his chest, already knowing he'd agree to this insanity. He didn't want to be there, but if he knew about it, he would have to be. He heaved a deep sigh, thinking she ought to be spanked. "Okay, so when?"

"Early July, somewhere off school grounds. Because my abilities are more advanced, the challenge will be more advanced. You need to expect that."

"Alright, I'll do this, but on *one* condition," he sternly replied, wagging his index finger in front of her nose. "You *will* promise me there will no more after this--not for Xavier, not for Weir, not for *anyone*."

She dutifully held her hand up like a Boy Scout taking a pledge. "I promise."

Chapter 25

Monday night, all the staff convened in the mission room to evaluate last Thursday's raid on the refinery. Scott conducted it sitting down, his leg propped up. Disappointed the discs were worthless intelligence, he steeled himself and explained the details of what had happened to illustrate the importance of always re-clipping their hypo-pistols.

Logan interrupted. "First of all, there's no way you could've known that sedative was gonna wear off that fast."

"Which is exactly why I should have been more alert," Scott argued.

"Second, One-Eye, there's no way you could've known your lasers would be useless on that mutant."

Scott saw heads nodding in agreement all around. "Still, if I'd kept my hypo accessible, I'd have had a backup for that contingency."

"You just don't want anyone to talk you out of blaming yourself, do you bub?" Logan retorted. "Listen, things happen. We do what we can."

"Logan's right," Xavier intervened. "We don't need to beat ourselves up about things beyond our control."

Scott colored. "Airwolf will do the follow-up survey during their flight training runs this week," Xavier went on.

"Then we'll decide how we did."

Jack swelled with pride, excited tomorrow was his day to learn fly the Lady at mach.

Before dawn, Tuesday morning, Andi slid into Airwolf's pilot seat and Jack took engineering until they got in the air and above air-traffic lanes, then he slipped forward into the co-pilot's seat.

"Ready?" Andi asked.

He grinned. "Aye, Captain," and took over. "Turbo," he said, pressing the button that disengaged the rotor and engaged the thrusters. Andi's hands hovered cautiously over the controls ready to resume control in an instant, should Jack lose control. As fast as combat helicopters he was used to were, Airwolf was entirely different. It was like instantly going from helicopter to fighter jet in turbo.

The helicopter jolted, lost altitude and swam hard in Jack's hands as he adjusted to her feel, but with pounding heart and firm hand, he steadied her.

"Very good," Andi said, "it's kind of like jumping out of an airplane. No one can really tell you what the first step feels like."

After that, he flew her down the Atlantic coast, across the Gulf, then north and home again, testing his metal and Airwolf's with every maneuver he knew. Andi knew he had the verve to fly Airwolf. After all, it was Stringfellow Hawk who'd taught him to fly and he'd gone to the Naval Academy, already a skilled pilot. That had been back in Hawke's good years.

They settled into the hanger by midmorning and Andi popped up to Scott's room to see how he was faring after the mornings dressing change. Jean ushered her in. "Tea?" she asked.

Andi nodded as she went to Scott, propped on pillows against the headboard, a cup and saucer in his hand and flopped into the rattan chair at his bedside.

"So how'd Jack do?" he asked.

Andi snapped her fingers. "A breeze."

Jean handed her a steaming cup on a saucer, then gracefully perched on the edge of the bed near Scott's legs. "I hope you're taking advantage of this," Andi told her with a nod toward Scott, "and getting some wedding planning done while you've got a captive audience, here."

Scott groaned.

Jean, beaming with enthusiasm, fetched a legal pad stacked with torn-out magazine pages from her night stand and handed them to Andi to look through. "Professor Xavier wants us to do whatever we want."

"Within reason," Scott hedged. Jean threw him a look, which he returned in innocent "what-did-I-say" fashion.

Andi just smiled at their teasing and looked through the bridal gown clippings. She knew perfectly well marriage was important to Scott as a commitment and because it represented a first step towards a family he could call his own.

Before dawn the next day, Jack was in Airwolf's pilot's chair and Andi manned engineering until they were underway, then she joined him as his co-pilot. It was another day of maneuvering at turbo, but today they simulated defensive maneuvers, dog fighting and weapons fire in a remote region in preparation for the night's mission. Then, after sunset, they lifted-off again and headed for the mutant compound in the southeast corner of New Mexico. Once there, they used the doppler to identify thermal signatures and fired missiles on every unoccupied building leaving only flames behind them like a black angel of wrath. Then they slipped away to visit a special farmhouse in Oklahoma.

From high above, Andi studied the doppler readings of three heat signatures in the farmhouse below as they ease-dropped on the bedtime conversation between two grandparents and their five or six year old grandson, Joey, Sylvia's child. It was just a fact-finding mission to determine exactly what Sylvia's family situation was and they weren't expecting Sylvia to be there. She was, no doubt, living on the run and sending home what meager means she could scrape up. The farm in general looked inactive and past it's prime with the house sagging in the middle for want of maintenance. They also ran video and infrared.

"That's enough," Andi said. "A quick stop in Dallas, then home."

The swung over the retired refinery, running infrared and doppler scans. The place was a ghost-town now as it should be, the previous mutant occupants having scattered like so many cockroaches when the light came on, scuttling to find a new place to hide. After that, they headed home.

Logan entered the hanger just as they shut down the turbines and he drew out the fuel line, telling himself ruefully as he did, that he could add crew-chief to his repertoire of trades. Jack wanted to fly again the next day, but to Logan's relief, Andi said, "No, we need to give Logan a break and take care of our classes." He thought her a saint for saying so and, being hungry, talked "Saint Andi" and Jack easily into going out for a late night breakfast.

Early the next morning, Andi presented Xavier with the information about the Oklahoma farm. Later, he had Storm drive him to town, where he arranged for a courier to deliver a large sum of cash and, using his telepathy to wipe memories, carefully erased any references to himself that could be traced. He returned to the school pleased, hoping his secret charity might bring one wayward mutant home to her child.

When Sylvia's family received the mysterious blessing they only found a note saying, "From a friend of Sylvia's" enclosed.

Benjamin Weir eagerly dialed Andi's home phone. He hoped it was late enough to catch her home, but not so late as to wake her up. He heard her voice. "Hello?"

"It's Ben. I'm coming up next Thursday to scout a test site and was wondering if you'd join me? We could make a day of it--if you can get away."

Andi mulled that over. She definitely wanted to be in on choosing her test location. "I think that could be arranged. What time?"

"I could pick you up there around ten."

"I'll see you then."

Ben hung up, delighted. He loosened his silk tie and went into the bathroom and peering at his slicked-back hair, wondered what casual outfit he should wear this time.

The next morning, Logan sauntered into the gym office at his usual time, expecting a run-of-mill day, when Jack broke the news. "Mom took the day off. So, we're running the whole circus today. What do you think? Softball? Kick-ball? Volleyball?"

"What's she doing?"

Jack shrugged. "She didn't say."

Logan frowned into his coffee mug, irked for reasons he couldn't pinpoint. "Softball," he finally muttered, "so we can play too." If he'd known where she was, he'd have been more than just a little irked.

Ben Weir had done his research. He and Andi circled the outside of an old, windowless roller-skating rink on the north edge of Middleburg. Grass grew thickly through the cracked parking lot pavement. He had a key to a rusty padlock securing an even rustier chain on the front door, opened it and led her inside with his flashlight. It was dusty and spider-webbed with an old pock-marked cement floor. Even a corroded, old disco-ball still hung on the ceiling reflecting his flashlight like a dull jewel.

"What do you think?" he asked her.

"I feel like a martyr being shown the arena."

Her blithe metaphor shocked him. She walked around a bit more, then said. "It will do."

He mutely nodded and guided her out, quickly locking the doors again, unable to shake a sudden sense of foreboding.

He took her to lunch and wanted to visit more antique shops, but feeling both antiqued-out and tired of Ben, Andi asked to be taken home, preferring to have some of her day-off to herself this time. Disappointed, he dropped her off as asked, but just as she was getting out, much to her displeasure, he caught her hand and got his lips on it before she could escape.

Logan had dozed off, a book open on his bare chest, until a melodic voice drifted into his ears waking him enough to squint at the clock. It was nearly ten p.m. That was the usual time she came by to check on Elliot. He put his book aside, got up, pulled a shirt over his shorts, switched out his light and leaned against the door jamb in the dim hall waiting for Andi to pass by. Still not ready to admit he missed her, he just told himself he wanted to find out what she'd been doing all day---out of curiosity.

Just as he saw her step into the hallway, Jean's head popped out her door and she gestured for Andi to come in. He watched her slip into their room, then several minutes later, slip-out again laughing quietly and waving good-night.

"Hey," he called softly as she neared him.

"Logan." She smiled, pleased to see him. "Fancy meeting you here? Want to have some ice cream?"

With a nod, he fell in step with her. "So, playing hooky today?" She just laughed lightly in reply. He dropped it until they were in the kitchen. Watching her scoop ice cream into dishes, he tried a more direct approach. "So, what'd you do today?"

She handed him a bowl. "Ben took me test-location shopping." She ignored the face he made. "We decided on an old roller-rink in Middleburg."

They sat down and Logan took a bite in silence. The cold chocolate melting on his tongue wasn't near as tasty as it might have been before hearing that.

"He wanted to know what I thought of the place and I think I shocked him. I told him it was like showing a martyr their arena." She chuckled.

He stared at her wanting to shake her, not thinking that funny in the slightest.

"Then we had lunch and he wanted to visit some antique shops. He seems pretty fascinated in that sort of thing."

"You like antiques?"

"Not really. Sometimes it's just nice talking to another grown-up for awhile. You and Professor Xavier and Ben are really the only people over thirty I have to talk to, you know."

That gave him pause for thought. He realized then that he saw her giving herself away everyday to these delinquents, young and old, without even considering the wear and tear it was on her and relented a little his hardness of heart about her taking off with Weir. Chiding himself for not being a better friend and giving Weir so much opportunity, he appointed himself as her protector and made a regular effort after that to get her away for a drive, a movie or just pizza and a game of cribbage. Not just for her. He had the same problem. He, too, needed grown-up time away from this sea of children and they had some things in common, like a lack of aging and his nightmares. What he didn't anticipate was the side-effect of spending so much extra time with her. He was thriving on her company and her scent was penetrating his every molecule, though he'd never admit if anyone asked. He couldn't even admit to himself. If he did, then he'd *have* to make some sort of *relationship* decision and he just wasn't ready or willing to do that. Even so, he found himself addicted; helpless to either leave her or give her up. No, it was going to take something more to push him over the edge.

Continued in Chapters 26-30...