

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

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Chapter 6

Somewhere far away Logan heard a banging noise. It invaded his dreams as he was running from flaming missiles falling all around him, explosions everywhere. He started awake with a gasp as someone persistently pounded on his door three more times. He stared at the clock. It was only eight-thirty am. Irritably he pounced on the door, unlocked it and flung it open, snarling, "What?!"

Jack Smith was there, lounging leisurely against the door frame, a box under his arm and a grin on his face, completely unintimidated. Liking Logan, he'd already made up his mind that his bark was worse than his bite. "Good morning, *Coach* Logan."

"What do *you* want?"

Jack presented him the box. "Compliments of Professor Xavier."

Logan opened it and stared at a pair of athletic shoes. "You got me up for this?"

Jack offered him a small, but plump plastic bag. "Some of my sweats for you to borrow for awhile."

Logan snatched it and tried to shut the door again.

Jack blocked it. "Not so fast, hoser. Time to get up. Get breakfast. Go over our game-plan for the day." He pushed into the room.

Logan tossed the box and bag on the floor and flopped back face first on the bed, grumbling, "What game-plan? I thought class wasn't till ten."

"It's ten for the kids. For us, nine. What do you know about basketball?"

Logan snorted. "I've seen it on TV."

"Hmmm, that's what I was afraid of. If you're going to coach basketball you've gotta at *least* understand the rudimentary principles of the game. I need to teach you to play a little."

Logan groaned.

"You're not much of a morning person are you?"

Logan rolled over and gave him a hard look. "You're not going away are you?"

"Not a chance," Jack grinned.

Logan groaned to a sitting position, then retrieved the shoes and bag. Already in sweatpants, he quickly completed his ensemble, used the john, ran a brush through his hair and muttered, "Okay. Let's go. I need a cup of coffee and some breakfast."

Jack jovially clapped him on the shoulder as they headed for the stairs, getting only a grumpy glare in return.

After breakfast, they spent an hour charging up and down the outdoor court until they both were thoroughly winded. Between laughing and gasping for breath, Jack advised Logan he should, at least for today, just pretend he knew what was going on and keep an eye out for rough-housing and explained some of the basics. "We call 'Coach's Rules' usually," he said, "which means no powers allowed, so you have to watch that. If you see unauthorized mutant powers, whistle and bench them."

"If you're out here, then where's Andi's classes?" Logan panted.

"Inside," Jack replied, sagging against the net-post with the ball under his arm, "She's doing aerobics with the girls. While the weather stays tolerable, we switch. Tomorrow we're inside. Usually on Fridays we do something co-ed." Jack checked his watch. "Come on, the boys will be dressing out soon."

After class, Jack offered to help him clean-up Scott's bike, so the task went quickly. Then lunch. They found Andi waiting for them outside the cafeteria. Jack greeted her by encircling her waist with his arm and planting a kiss on her forehead. Then she turned to Logan. "So, how was your first class?"

Jack snorted. "The hoser had a great time." Then challenged Logan with a raised brow.

Logan scowled and jabbed a finger of mock antagonism into Jack's chest as he replied, "What do you know, Yankee-boy?" Jack just pushed his finger away with a grin.

Andi chuckled at their good-natured raillery. Though about equal in height and weight, their personalities were polar opposites. Jack was cool-tempered with a fearless devil-may-care disposition and a hearty sense of humor, while Logan was more hard-bitten, hot-headed and smart-mouthed. Reluctantly, she also had to concede that Logan unexpectedly stirred the coals of her heart, waking it from its cold slumber since her husband's death, but the whole idea of getting involved again made her uneasy, so she pushed the feeling away.

After lunch, Logan spent an hour in Xavier's office going over his contract of employment. The Professor briefed him on school staff responsibilities and expectations, standards of conduct, such as no smoking or alcohol on the premises and no swearing around the students and the importance of public face outside the school as well as the unwritten obligations and expectations for being a "team" member. The deal included a modest allowance with free room and board for a year's term of service.

"A year," he thought, studying the contract uneasily. *"No more drifter life and three squares a day in exchange for a lot less freedom and a lot more obligation."*

In the end, with a deep breath, he put his name to the contract, then left Xavier's office nervous as a bridegroom filled with mixed doubts and anticipations about what he'd just promised. Then he wandered back to the hanger to try out helping Jack on Airwolf. Loud rock welcomed him and Jack turned it down as soon as he saw him. On the table, half-buried, Logan spied a framed photo of two guys he hadn't noticed when here before. He held it up, "Who're these guys?"

Jack glanced at it, then back to the ratchet he was twisting. "Those are the guys who left us this Lady. They're both dead now. That's why we have her---the younger one there made Mom promise to keep Airwolf about a month before he shot himself."

Logan carefully set the photo down. "Is that part of the long story?"

"It's the end," Jack replied, then patting the old bird affectionately, added. "She's starting a new story now." Coming to a stopping place, he joined Logan at the work-table. After quickly wiping his hands on a rag, he pulled forward a turbine blueprint. "Okay, here's what we need to do...."

Half-listening, Logan thought of Andi, wishing to again inhale her bewitching aroma.

Chapter 7

Nursing the last of his beer, Jack was just listening politely to the woman in the chair beside him talking a blue streak about her job and her ex. He just nodded, puffed blue rings of cigar smoke into the air and periodically removed her hand as graciously as he could from his thigh, since he wasn't in the 'test-drive' market just now. Unlike Logan, who was clearly less discriminating about his oat-sowing. The woman's girlfriend had latched onto Logan as amorously as he'd latched onto her as soon as they'd walked in and, though Logan claimed he didn't dance, after five shots of Tequila each, they'd just stayed out on the dance floor. You couldn't have wedged a Q-tip between them. Jack gave the thinly populated dance floor a quick glance, then checked his watch again. It was two am. At least twenty-five minutes had passed since he'd last seen them. Not that he was worried, he was just ready to leave. Just as he polished off the last of his beer, he saw them strolling back, the rosy-cheeked girl clinging to Logan's arm. As soon as they were re-seated, Logan grabbed his cigar from the ashtray and re-lit it, inhaling deeply, threw back the rest of his drink, then announced, "Let's go."

Jack amiably snuffed out his own cigar and collected his coat from his chair.

His gabby female companion sniveled, "You aren't leaving so soon?"

"We've got a big undercover job in the morning," Logan announced gruffly, "Gotta go."

Jack hid his smile. When they'd met the girls, he'd spun some ludicrous story about them being undercover vice detectives and that he was Logan's new partner fresh from the Marines. He told the same story with marginal additions at every beer joint they'd visited and, after some initial surprise, Logan had just gone with the flow.

Hurriedly, Logan's lady-friend scribbled her phone number on a cocktail napkin and handed it to him. On the way out, they both hit the john and Jack, without surprise, saw that napkin sail directly into the trash.

Outside, in his truck, he fastened his seat-belt and let the windows down for smoke. Logan, ignoring his

seat-belt entirely, slouched in the corner and propped his foot on the dash. Since they were in Middleburg, about forty minutes north of Westchester and it was past two in the morning, Jack said, "It'll be three by the time we get back to town, how 'bout sleeping on my couch tonight?"

Logan exhaled smoke out his window. "Sure. Why not?"

When they got to Jack's townhouse, Jack dashed upstairs to fetch bedding leaving Logan to look the place over. It was a nice set up. A flagstone fireplace in the corner. A couple nice paintings on the walls. A book shelf loaded with athletic trophies. Persian rugs and a huge, over-stuffed dark leather couch occupying the center of the room. Seeing family pictures on the mantle, Logan went over to have a closer look. One was a family portrait that included Andi, Jack and what he guessed were her other two children, a boy and a girl. He noticed Andi was wearing her hair down and loose in the photo, unlike the baseball-capped look he was used to.

Jack's feet thundered down the stairs as he returned, a pillow and quilt tucked under his arm and Logan faced him accusingly. "How is it, I have to live at Xavier's and you get a house?"

Jack plopped the pillow and quilt on the sofa. "Look around. Obviously I got stuff and you don't."

Logan snorted, then indicated the family portrait. "Nice picture. I'm not used to seeing her without the hat."

"Mom doesn't do herself justice," Jack replied. "That's why, a couple years ago, I had this done. He gestured for him to follow to the stair well, switched on some track-lights and pointed at a large, black and white glamour photo mounted on the wall above the first landing. "I made an appointment for Mom with a photographer who specialized in old hollywood-style portraits like this."

Logan gaped. Andi was positively sultry. She was half-turned away, as if someone called her and she was glancing coyly back, her lips in an alluring pout. It was a far cry from the baseball cap and pink bubble gum he was used to.

"I had him do three, all different," Jack rambled on. "I kept this one and gave my brother and sister each one of the others." He chuckled. "Alex's room-mate wants to date her and Jana probably hung hers in the garage---she's angry she didn't turn out slim and tall like Mom." Jack reflected silently on the photo a moment, then added "I like it because it gives her a mysterious look. Dad used to say 'she always had something mysterious going on'. Would you believe, she was flying Airwolf pregnant with my brother without Dad even knowing?"

Logan tore his gaze from the picture to look at Jack. "Did he ever find out?"

Jack snorted. "Yeah, he found out and he was mad, too." More quietly he added, "You know, I'm just starting to understand how frustrating her mystery binges can be. The weekend after we got here, she suddenly drove off to New York without a word, then came back and has been acting funny ever since."

Logan thought of that haunted look he'd seen on her. "And she won't tell you?"

Jack snorted and shook his head. "Are you kidding? She still thinks she needs to protect me."

Logan couldn't resist a yawn. Observing it, Jack clapped him on the shoulder and switched off the track lights. "Well, good-night. See you in the morning" and headed upstairs.

Logan arranged the quilt and pillow, pulled off his boots, stripped to the waist, turned off the lights, and flopped onto the couch. He pondered the paradox between the portrait and the woman until sleep finally overtook him.

"Hello, Professor Xavier. It's Benjamin Weir," a suave voice informed Xavier over the phone the next day. "Good afternoon, Mr. Weir," Xavier politely replied. "What can I do for you?"

"I'm just touching base on how our consultants are working out. They've been with you five weeks now."

"Exceptionally well, Mr Weir."

"So I didn't steer you wrong about them?"

"No."

"And how's the training with Ms. Ravannisky coming?"

"Progressing steadily," Xavier reported. "She can sense the location and identity of every mutant on the campus."

"Very good," Weir purred. "And the helicopter?"

"They're working on it steadily. A couple of my people are helping."

"Very good. If there's any other way I may be of assistance, you have my number. I'll be in touch again soon."

"Goodbye, Mr Weir." Xavier hung up. He couldn't explain the distaste he had for the fellow.

After hanging up, Benjamin Weir scrolled through his computer calendar. He really wanted to find a time to visit Westchester and get some time with Andi. Too many obligations in November already, but he noted December had some room. He put her name in the weekend before Christmas as a target date for a personal visit.

Chapter 8

Early Friday morning, Scott kissed Jean goodbye and waved her and Professor Xavier off on another trip to Washington DC, leaving him as Head Master for the weekend once more. On his way in, he disapprovingly surveyed Logan and Jack's mess of an old motorcycle they'd been rebuilding, then, with a quick glance, assured himself his own bike's new wheel-lock was still in place. By evening, as usual, Jack and Logan, were off for town. Fortunately, no trouble had come from it and he credited Jack for having prevented any melt-downs up to now. So just he, Storm, Andi ate quiet dinner in the cafeteria with the students and while the women hung out in the Rec-room, he opted for Airwolf.

He preferred working on her alone when he could. Andi, Jack and Logan and their loud rock were here most afternoons and evenings, hanging out together like three musketeers and it bugged him. Logan was a regular prodigal son who seemed able to just breeze back into town, get embraced and celebrated, while he, like the devoted son who never left, got to only watch the party from afar.

His thoughts drifted to Andi again. He was irresistibly drawn to watching her interact with the students. Being around someone so warm and motherly was outside his experience and it stirred uncomfortable, unsatisfied memories and wistful feelings he thought long dead and buried. Surely, she was the sort of mother he'd always dreamed of as a child in the orphanage, where circumstances and his mutant gift apparently doomed him forever from being adoptable, lovable--*wanted*. She seemed to possess a magic touch at giving away love and affirmation and it echoed against the abyss in his soul. Once, he secretly overheard her stopping a couple kids from teasing Elliot with names like 'Owl-boy'. She really laid into them, then after sending them on their way took Elliot into her arms and spoke so many positive and kind words his ears burned. He remembered all too well the merciless name-calling, rejection and aloneness he endured as a child with no such guardian angel to rescue and comfort him. He'd always coped alone, learned to bury his feelings and became an island of resilience and self-control, but watching her with Elliot touched those hidden, forgotten feelings. It resurrected such pain he had to flee, and dash outside, then sprint clear to the fence on the far end of the estate. There, panting and his lungs burning from the cold air, he slid down the wall to the ground, his face too cold to even feel the tears.

He was so lost he in this dark revelry, he didn't even hear anyone come in until a feminine voice suddenly said, "Hey?" He started and looked-up. It was Andi, leaning against the copters side, peering in at him on the floor under the back console.

She smiled apologetically. "I didn't mean to startle you."

He glanced at his watch, surprised it was nearly midnight.

"Since you're still up, I thought you might like to sneak into the kitchen with me and have some ice cream?"

He hesitated. Up to now, he'd kept his conversation with her limited to mostly to work related topics as he had an intuitive fear of what a more personal conversation might dredge-up, but made up his mind to risk it anyway.

"Yes ma'am, I would."

Upstairs, Andi unlocked the kitchen door and he followed her in, feeling guilty as a thief. Opening one of the huge refrigerator doors, Andi peered in. "We have chocolate walnut or strawberry or both?"

"Both," Scott answered.

Andi grabbed a tub and handed him one. "I stock this myself, because I'm often here late and I sometimes like a snack." She didn't mention the real the reason she kept such hours, didn't mention the nightmares that disturbed her sleep now.

They scooped ice cream into bowls, then sat in the dining room, illuminated only by the kitchen's fluorescent glare. They discussed some technical things about Airwolf's fiber-optics, then how their classes were going, finally lapsing into silence. Scott stirred his ice cream soup distractedly. "You're really good for these kids," he finally ventured.

Andi had already pushed her bowl aside. "Oh? Why do you think so?"

"You go the extra mile to make them feel important. Wanted. Most of these kids have been thrown away. You listen to them and play with them and even take time to say good-night to them. They need that."

Andi leaned her chin on her hand, observing Scott toy with this leftover ice cream, his enigmatic ruby-quartz glasses not meeting her eyes while he spoke. She couldn't explain an inexplicable sense of something troubling Scott from within, something she felt drawn to find out. "Sounds like you speak from experience," she replied.

He put the spoon down and pushed his bowl away, clasping his hands nervously on the table. "I guess I do."

"Didn't you grow up in an orphanage?"

He inclined his head he had.

"What was it like?"

He shrugged. "You know how orphanages are."

"Not really."

"Well, I can tell you that it was purgatory in spades."

"Because you were different?"

Scott snorted. Even before his gift appeared, he'd been a painfully shy, skinny child, all arms and legs and still re-learning how to use them after a year of being comatose followed by another year of re-hab---a walking target for mockery. His best friends had been books.

"I suppose the other kids made fun of you and ostracized you." She observed his jaw tighten.

"Something like that."

"No friends. Being alone all the time," Andi carefully ventured. "Having to be on guard constantly. It must have been pretty difficult."

He locked his gaze into the distance. "I survived," he murmured. Inside him tide of old buried feelings and memories he usually kept so carefully controlled, were suddenly stirring around like a sea before a storm. Feeling his cheeks flush, he desperately hoped the dimness was enough to keep her from seeing.

Softly, Andi asked "How many nights did you cry yourself to sleep?"

He just shrugged, but Andi saw the faint glitter of a single tear escape from under his glasses.

Far too many, he remembered. He did nothing about the tear, hoping she wouldn't see it either. He struggled to stay in control, torn between an urge to flee and a desire to stay. He shifted uncomfortably in his chair.

"So you never ended up adopted?" she asked.

He shook his head. "With this?" he replied, pointing at his glasses. "Who'd want to?"

Andi sighed. "True, I suppose even kids with ordinary handicaps aren't easily adopted"

He gave a bitter laugh. "Handicapped. I never thought of myself as that."

"Just a freak, a weirdo---a monster?"

He stared quietly into his clasped hands, his jaw clenched against the surging griefs from the past.

"It was something you really wanted though, wasn't it?"

"Of course, every orphan does," he murmured.

"You must of felt quite hurt, not to be wanted," Andi gently probed.

Both his cheeks shone with bits of wetness now. "I can't believe this," he scoffed in embarrassment, scrubbing at his cheeks with both hands, mortified both to be so vulnerable and to have it seen. It had all been so comfortably buried. "That was so long ago. I'm grown up now--it shouldn't matter. I should be over it."

Andi quietly got up and got some napkins for him, then remained standing next to him as she offered them to him. Full of maternal feeling, she stroked his head, years of motherly instinct guiding her words. "But it does matter. You see me with these kids and it reminds you of all those lost things, doesn't it?"

He could only nod under her hand, wondering how she could hit the truth so easily and, turning, rested his forehead against her stomach, the old sorrows pouring out of him in soft sobs like an infection from a lanced wound. She spoke to him as he rested there, a stream of kind words that poured into his soul like warm oil into an empty vessel, filling places he didn't even know were empty. Time seemed to stand still. Nor would he precisely recall what she said or exactly how they came to agree upon it, but, somehow, when they walked out of the cafeteria later, he had a new adopted Mother and she, a new son.

Andi walked away a little stunned herself. It was only gradually, over time that she realized it was the hole in her heart left by her own "lost" daughter that had made her and Scott's heart's resonate so well. Adopting each other somehow seemed to ease both their pain.

So, on Sunday, when Jean and Xavier quickly sensed a change in Scott while he enthusiastically greeted Jean by swinging her around and kissing her. Though Xavier respected his people's privacy, his curious hope couldn't resist a quick peek into Scott's mind. He was immediately pleased to see all he good he'd hoped Andi would be for Scott had, indeed, come to pass and he left them to themselves, smiling with satisfaction.

Alone with Jean, Scott explained as much of the conversation with Andi as he could, then apologized profusely for being an idiot, losing perspective and generally being a pain to put up with for the last two months. Jean hugged him then, rejoicing to have her happy, confident Scott back, the Scott she remembered from before Logan's arrival. Confident Logan would no longer be a problem, she didn't know she was already in the sunset of his interests.

Chapter 9

Andi finally found a likely prospect in her adamantium trace. The Lapointe Corporation, a Canadian bio-medical research facility in northern Alberta, had received an adamantium shipment matching the estimated specs and time-frame. The facility had also been completely devastated by fire two days afterwards. The insurance company faxed her their report and salvage inventory. According to them, it was accidental and no adamantium was salvaged, though it would have easily survived any fire, had it been there. Apparently, Lapointe's executive officer, Klaus Macgoldrick, died in a car accident the very same week and the insurance company's reporting investigator died in a car wreck as well the following week. After he'd submitted his report, of course. That struck her as too coincidental. The vice-executive, Phillippe Lanier, was still alive, though, and after tracking him down, she talked to him by phone. Retired now, he was reticent at her first call, but called back a couple days later willing to confess some nefarious doings, but only in person in Alberta. That was the sum of her report to Logan and Xavier.

"I don't guarantee this has any connection to Logan's affair," she cautioned.

"But it's certainly curious," Xavier mused thoughtfully. "And he's not looking for reimbursement?"

She shook her head. "No. I guess he just wants to clean out his closet."

"You want to go?" he asked.

"Sure."

"It's my problem, I should be the one to go," Logan countered gruffly.

Xavier and Andi consulted privately mind to mind a few seconds, then Xavier replied, "You'll both go."

Expecting it to be a road trip, Logan turned to Andi, "Okay. So, when do we leave?"

Xavier pulled up flight reservations on his screen, and after another silent consultation with Andi, said, "I can book a flight next Tuesday, give you two days there and a return Friday." Andi nodded.

"An airplane!" Logan sarcastically challenged, "How do you think I'm going to do that? Metal detectors and me aren't on such good terms."

Andi and Xavier once more met in mental consultation, while Logan squinted between them, not liking the feeling of being the subject of a conversation he couldn't hear. He shook a finger at them. "You know, I don't like you guys doing that."

Xavier gave him a bemused smile. "We'll create the proper paperwork, give the airport authorities proper notice

and it should be no problem getting you on the plane, Logan. After all, people with double steel-hip joint replacements fly all the time."

Logan stared at Xavier, convinced he was whacked-out.

Before dawn Tuesday morning, Jack and Andi arrived to pick up Logan for the trip to LaGuardia. Only Scott, who was an early riser anyway, trailed down after a grumpy Logan to see them off. Jack opened the tailgate for him to stow his backpack under the bed-cover, while Scott leaned on the open passenger door chatting with Andi. They heard the tailgate slam.

"Come on, let's go," Logan snapped, striding briskly to the front and thumbing Andi inside. Scott stood aside, holding the door as Andi spun her legs into the cab and slid to the middle. "Be careful now," he told her.

"Don't worry, she's in good hands," Logan answered, sliding in next to her.

"*Your* hands are exactly what I'm talking about," Scott gibed as he closed the door.

As the truck pulled away, Logan hit the window button lowering it to the door, put out his arm and demonstrated his disdain for Scott's opinion with an upright finger.

At LaGuardia things went as smoothly as Xavier predicted. They picked up their tickets, presented the proper medical documents, were escorted to the security point, then he was frisked while Andi went through the regular stuff and it was over. No problem. Jack decided to hang around until they boarded, so they went to one of the cocktail lounges to pass the time. Finally, at the security check, Logan watched Jack first trade kisses with Andi, then he shook hands with him. "I'll see you guys Friday" he said and, with a wave, loped off. Andi's eyes followed her son. She worried about Jack treating Logan too brotherly and not heeding her cautions. When she turned back, she found Logan's hazel eyes intent on her. He smiled in that brazen way of his, then with a mock bow said, "After you."

At Edmonton International, they picked up their reserved SUV. Andi threw Logan the keys and they went over a map, then set out on the long trek to their destination, a small town called Hope River. Logan adjusted the heat before lowering his window two inches for smoke. He glanced at Andi, who was concentrating on making notes in her palm-pilot, then lit a cigar and exhaled smoke out the window. Alone with her again, he could whiff her faint sweetness once more. After a few miles of silence, he noticed her contemplating the snow-covered landscape, her elbow propped against the door supporting her chin. "Pretty out there, isn't it?" he remarked.

She started. "Oh...yeah, I guess it is. Living in southern California so long, I forgot how pretty snow is." Really, she'd been thinking about what it'd be like rooming with Logan. Once bunking with "the guys" had been routine back in the days with Jack's father, but that had been decades ago. In any case, it'd would give her a chance to observe how much a maverick he might really be and Jack had mentioned he could be fairly sour in the mornings.

"We have a long drive," Logan said, "how about telling me that Airwolf story?"

Andi laughed lightly. "So, how much of my background did Professor Xavier tell you?"

"Naval Academy. Then some sort of team that worked in South America with drug war stuff."

Andi laughed again, drawing a arched brow from him. "I was an illegal experiment in training women for special forces. It went sour and I was kicked out and my records falsified. I really wanted that Navy career, too." She sighed, still feeling a bitter twang about it even after all these years. "But," she went on, "the essential thing is the same OSI agent who altered my records, a guy named Briggs, also handled Airwolf. Now the scientist who designed Airwolf stole her to sell to a foreign power. Briggs recruited a former test pilot, named Hawke, to steal her back, which he did, but then Hawke held Airwolf hostage against Briggs to force him to find his missing brother in Vietnam."

Logan snorted "I bet that worked like a charm."

"True enough. Hawke just ended up flying Brigg's errands. About three years later, my ex-team commander put together a free-lance mission to extract the guy who ruined our careers, who he'd located living in Indonesia. He happened to have a death-bounty on his head in another country and my old commander's plan was to get revenge

by capturing him and turning him over to them." Andi's brow darkened. "We swore as a team we'd regroup at his call to do whatever he figured out."

Logan stared at her. "And you did that?"

She nodded. "Not just us. Mitch had a lot of friends, including Briggs, who brought Airwolf in to assist. That's how I met Hawke and his friend, Dom. Afterwards, Briggs wanted to hire me to work with them on Airwolf missions and I took the job because I was between circumstances right then, Jack's father having just died. I didn't know I was pregnant, and even when I did, I kept it secret to fly as long as I could because I needed the money."

Logan gave her another glance.

"I'd gotten to be friends with Dom and Hawke by then, so Dom hired me to work at his air service. Eventually, they helped me get my flying licenses and later taught me to fly Airwolf. By then, Hawke was more interested in parenting his adopted nephew, then flying for Briggs, but he wasn't about to give the Lady back. So, after the Gulf War, we faked her destruction, and since Briggs was supposed to have been killed during the conflict, our secret seemed safe. After that, Dom and Hawke kept her in shape until Dom died. Then Hawke took care of her alone until rheumatoid arthritis started crippling him. He'd have me fly him around about once a month."

"Why?"

Andi shrugged. "I think it was the only thing he could find any real happiness in. He lived like a hermit in an isolated cabin and was slowly losing his ability to take care of himself. He was depressed a lot. I know he was afraid of being institutionalized. Finally, one day he insisted I swear on Dom's grave that I'd keep Airwolf, then about a month later, I found him dead in his cabin. He'd shot himself."

Logan blew a curl of smoke out the window. "Too bad. So, when did Jack find out about Airwolf?"

"Not until after Hawke died, about three years ago. Hawke was so upset with his nephew's indifference to anything he cared about, he decided my children couldn't be trusted either and had also made me swear I'd keep it's existence secret."

"And what about the part about you flying Airwolf pregnant with Jack's brother?"

"Jack told you that?"

"He mentioned it."

"I guess that impresses him." She chuckled. "That's when we faked ditching Airwolf. Hawke and I had some mechanical trouble and put down, but it delayed us so long Dom had to explain to Danny why I was missing. I never once felt at risk in the old girl---but Danny didn't see it that way." She smiled at the memory, then looked at Logan, "Satisfied?"

He nodded as he tapped ash into the ashtray.

"Do you want me to drive?"

Logan shook his head. While she gazed out on the darkening countryside in silent revelry, Logan fell into his own about her. For the colder climate, she'd traded her baseball cap for a knit one and her hair curled from under it around her face and neck making her look charmingly girlish. Far from his memory of the sultry vixen in the photograph. Farther still from the stories Jack told him about her past adventures over their many beers. He still had a hard time imagining her as a hardened combat veteran.

They pulled off to grab supper, then hit the road again, finally pulling into the town of Hope River and their motel close to eight pm, mountain time. Feeling the hours, he looked forward to bed. While Andi was inside checking them in, he leaned against the car, waiting in the brisk, freezing air until she popped out again and they got back in to drive to their room.

"We're in room seventeen around the other side," she told him.

Logan's hand froze on the ignition key and he smirked her direction, "One room? Sounds cozy."

"It's a double," she replied matter-of-factly, "We're sharing for economics and security--there's always that remote chance someone might not like us poking around."

That didn't phase his smirk as he revved the engine to life and drove around to their parking space. They each grabbed their things and Andi let them into the room. "It's a no-smoking room--you'll have to smoke outside," she

announced handing him his card-key, "And don't get any funny ideas---if I'm not married to you, I don't sleep with you." Then she nonchalantly tossed her stuff on the bed farthest from the door and peeled off her wool pea-coat, adding, "You'd be surprised how much trouble that saves me."

"Hey, it's your life," he replied, peeling off his own jackets, un-tucking his shirts and flopping onto his bed with the remote. *That explains a lot*, he thought. Seeing how close Jack and Andi were, he'd often wondered why Jack never gave him any friendly warnings. Not even when he deliberately flirted with her right in front of him in his own house, while watching Sunday football did he seem to care. Now he understood---he didn't need to.

"Besides," Andi added, "I still have a little problem with post-stress---I could just roll over and kill you."

He darted a glance her way. She said that matter-a-factly without even looking up from arranging her laptop on the desk and it reminded him of Jack's stories about her, but then, he was never quite sure Jack wasn't just a little over-enthusiastic. She was like some kind of hero to him. He shrugged and focused on channel surfing.

When Andi came out of the bathroom after her shower, she found Logan's lamp already out. He was stretched out on his back, his bare chest half-covered by a sheet, eyes closed. Andi quietly set the alarm on the digital clock, turned off her light and slipped under her own covers.

Logan wasn't asleep yet. He heaved a deep breath to relax, unexpectedly whiffing that faint sweetness once more, wondering why, of all the women he'd known, she was the first with this magical, enticing aroma. Maybe that was part of her mystery.

Chapter 10

Hearing rustling in the room, Logan ignored it until he heard the door click open, then pried open an eye to see who was coming or going. It was Andi.

She saw he was awake. "I'm going out to get us some fast food for breakfast," she asked. "Any preferences?"

Clenching his eye shut again, he rolled over, his mumble lost in the pillow. The door clicked shut.

Outside in the crisp morning light, Andi took a moment to practice Professor Xavier's training and extended her mental sense, "feeling" to see if any other mutants were around. Detecting only Logan, she relaxed and hopped in the SUV.

To Logan, it seemed only seconds passed before he heard the door again, heard a chair moved and heard the rustle of paper. Then he smelled food and coffee. His stomach growled. With a groan, he threw off the sheet, and still in his jeans, switched from the bed to the chair opposite Andi, at the small table. She just handed him the bag and he fished out three biscuit sandwiches, devoured them hungrily, then sipped his black coffee. Neither spoke. After swigging the last of his coffee, he abruptly collected his clothing from the floor and headed for the john. Fetching her crossword book, Andi listened to the shower, noting finicky and fastidious were two words no one would call Logan. Once he was done with the shower, he retrieved his shaving kit, then shaved his lip, chin and neck and brushed his hair. After being a widow nearly five years now, she felt strange being suddenly thrust into a room with a man doing such ordinary things and, though she didn't directly watch, she was aware. She noticed he slicked his hair flat, proving he didn't start his day with those two odd cowlicks, curling up like little devil's horns on his head. He contented himself with simply turning his back to her to un-zip his pants and tuck his shirts in, then zip-up before facing her again. "So, what's first?" he muttered, fastening his huge buckle.

"The Fire Marshall's office. Maybe we can interview the investigator--if he's still around," Andi replied, stuffing the PC back in her pack. "Then maybe the newspaper office after that. And lunch." She shrugged the pack onto her shoulder, stuck her cell into its holster on her belt, grabbed her coat and pocketed the palm-pilot. "We can do whatever we want until we meet Lanier at one-thirty." She tossed him the car key. He checked for his key card, then held the door for her.

Actually, Andi had already read a fax of the fire report on Lapointe. It was recorded as accidental, but, since they were going to be in town anyway, she'd saved inquiries about the investigator to do in person. As it turned out, it didn't matter. Logan shook his head as they walked immediately back out of the Fire Marshall's office. Apparently, the reporting investigator had also died in a car accident within a week of filing his report fifteen years

ago. "Either these are some unlucky guys," Logan observed, "or they really bit off more than they could chew. I can't wait to hear what Lanier has to say."

They went to the newspaper office then, where they were promptly informed that the year in question wasn't on mini-disc, but still hard-bound in the public library basement. There, a nerdy boy lead them downstairs to a environmentally-controlled room, let them in and left them to research to their hearts content. Posters instructing the proper use of the materials in both French and English were on every wall. The books were arranged chronologically, so she quickly located the right one. Andi read articles about the fire and compared obituaries with the list of other board members on her palm-pilot for any other untimely deaths, while Logan paced around restlessly. "Is private-eye work always this boring?" he grouched.

"It's certainly not for the impatient," she retorted mildly.

Grumbling under his breath, he finally managed to occupy himself reading this or that.

Finding nothing else, Andi put the book away and, to Logan's relief, they left. Since it was still early, she suggested they find a coffee shop.

Logan peered around the largely empty coffee shop as they seated themselves with steaming mugs of java, then noticed Andi was pulling a narrow peg-board and a deck of cards from her pack. "Ever play cribbage?" she asked.

Eyeing her over his mug, he saw an impish glitter in her eye. "No, but guess I'll learn."

She smiled and shuffled the cards. "It'll pass the time."

Continued in Chapters 11-15...