

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

Synopsis: This story begins 18 months prior to the Liberty Island incident with Magneto and introduces several original characters: Ben Weir, Andi Ravannisky and her two sons, Jack & Alex around whom events play out.

{All names, locations and businesses are products of imagination or used fictitiously and resemblances to persons living or dead is coincidental. Copyrighted characters belong to their respective entities: X-men to Marvel/Century Fox; Airwolf to Belisarius Productions.}

Chapter 1

Benjamin Weir snapped on his office lights, dropped his briefcase beside his desk, then flipped his computer on to check e-mail. Only one caught his immediate attention. It was one of *Their* encrypted messages. He sighed. *They* were the reason he didn't have a secretary. *Their* business required he stay free of even casual scrutiny, so he had to hire independent answering and dictation services. He didn't even know who *They* were. Just a voice on the phone, a letter in the mail, an encrypted e-mail. He pulled this new one up to decrypt it.

They had first anonymously contacted him in nineteen-forty-five, right after he was discharged from the Navy, a youth of twenty-four. *They* put him through college and law school, then let him practice law and run *Their* errands, which usually involved finding people or connecting people or relocating people. It wasn't bad work. Well compensated. He even had his own jet for all the globe-trotting the job required. He'd also gotten the impression, over these past many years, that *They* considered him one of *Them*, thought exactly what that meant he didn't know.

He read the decrypted message, then sat back thoughtfully. It was more on the on-going mutant phenomenon. *They* wanted him to broker a deal with a key mutant player to put a couple of *Their* people into his program at a date yet to be specified sometime within the next eighteen months, but, for now, *They* just wanted him to just recruit the selected candidates whose files would arrive by mail shortly. End message. Ben hit delete. Though his own opinion on mutants was neutral, clearly, his employers believed developing methods to manage them and any resulting conflict was of supreme importance.

Two days later a thick manila folder arrived containing more project details and the candidate dossiers. He flipped through them. One was a young Marine named Jack Smith and, the other, a woman, Angelique Ravannisky. He stared with surprise at her photo, recognizing her. Twenty-eight years ago, he'd been sent to extricate and relocate her. Back then, he'd been a Navy JAG in the Norfolk region and she'd been in the DC area, married to a renegade guy who led a high risk kind of investigation team, though that was a *generous* description of what they were. Unfortunately, her husband and his team also had just the sort of colored past a powerful ex-CIA man, such as the one who controlled them, could use to keep them cooperative. That's how they ended-up dying somewhere in Africa. Ironically, the ex-CIA man also died around the same time in a plane crash. That's when Weir and his team had moved in and covertly extricated her. He stared at Smith's photo again, noting Andi was listed as his mother. She must have been pregnant when they pulled her out. He should've guessed from the picture---the kid was a carbon-copy of the father. According to his stats, he was currently still a Marine cobra pilot and had a fine record as a decorated combat pilot from the Indian-Pakistani conflict.

He studied Andi's photo again, struck by her youthfulness and realized she *had* to be like him, *had* to have the same gift of slow-aging as he did. Though he was technically ninety-three, he still looked thirty. He scanned her current stats. Ah, a widow. *Good*, he thought. He'd been quite taken with her when they'd met before, but it'd not been the appropriate time, but now, perhaps there was an opportunity. Her stats also included another two grown children from a second marriage and that she was presently located in LA, employed as a private investigator on a special abuse and endangerment child welfare team.

He inspected the remaining project details. He was supposed to sell the project to the mother and let her persuade the son team up with her. He wondered why *They* even wanted her kid, then, as he read on, understood. They wanted Jack Smith *because* he was a copter pilot. His mother also was one and happened to have a very *special* helicopter in her possession. They wanted the whole package; her, her son and that helicopter. His job was to get it for *Them*.

He pulled up airline reservations on-line and booked a flight to California for the next day. He'd contact her after he arrived.

Ben looked across his frothy cappuccino at Andi. They'd spent a pleasant couple hours catching up. He hadn't gotten to the nitty-gritty yet and now felt oddly reluctant to. He was enjoying her contagious laugh and ease of manner. Time hadn't touched her. She looked exactly as he remembered her twenty-eight years ago. She was a tall, about five seven or eight, trim and tom-boyish in a baseball cap, her wavy chestnut hair drawn through the back of it into a pony-tail. Her green eyes were the color of soft moss and her lips like red wine full of warmth and smiles. Across her nose was a dash of freckles like a stray sprinkle of nutmeg and a wisp of ill-behaved curl insisted upon dangling down her forehead no matter how many times she tried to push it back in place.

Andi broke his revelry. "You're a man on a mission, Ben. It's been twenty eight years and suddenly you're on my doorstep for a visit? What's really up?"

He sighed and set his cappuccino down. "You've got me. *We*," he said with emphasis, "were wondering if you might be interested in a little change of scenery---such as New England and a change in career---like being a coach at a school for orphans." He looked at her significantly.

Andi's eyes narrowed. When they'd met before, she'd assumed he'd been working for Mr. Lei, whom she knew and trusted, but she didn't really know anything for certain about Ben Weir. "Is it important?"

"Crucial."

She was silent, her frown asking 'why'. He leaned forward and spoke more softly, forcing her to lean closer as well. "You're aware of the mutant issues?" She gave a barely perceivable nod. "You realize then it's becoming an increasingly divisive issue---socially and politically?" She inclined her head again. "Conflict will be inevitable" he stated flatly, "the real question, *Our* question, is how much conflict, between who and to what degree? We want to keep it---ah, managed shall we say. Fortunately we're not the only ones interested in managing this phenomenon---there's a gentlemen in New England currently organizing mutants to protect themselves and humanity at large from extremists of either side."

She arched a "so-what" brow and idly stirred her cappuccino.

Ben tried a more personal track. "So, of the total cases you've investigated this year alone, how many would you say involved mutant children?"

Andi's eyes snapped up. "One or two percent...maybe."

"How many more are falling through the social cracks, Andi? How many are abandoned and living on the streets? Alone? Hated?"

She squeezed her eyes shut and hung her head. "I don't know. I don't think *anyone* knows."

"And believe me, they don't want to," Ben asserted. Andi's softened gaze met his and he knew he'd touched a nerve. "This man in New England," he went on, "runs a school for the gifted--gifted mutants really. He finds troubled and abandoned mutant kids, puts them in his school and protects them, educates them, helps them learn to manage their powers and use them in positive ways for the good of humanity."

"So what do you want me to do? Just stroll into his program? Oh, come on, Ben, there's pay-off some place."

"So there is. We believe Dr. Xavier is essentially creating a team of mature mutants to counter any extremists. But the guy's a in a wheelchair, Andi. No real military background. How's he going to organize any of them into an effective contingency force?"

"And you think I could? A military consultant?"

Ben nodded. "In effect, yes. It's going that way anyway and a small tactical group response will be the most effective way to keep things in hand."

She snorted. "Does he know that? Do you think he'll just welcome me with open arms?"

"Xavier's a visionary. He's also a shrewd player who needs every ace-in-the-hole he can get. I think the potential gains will make him take the risk."

"And you think you can fit me in with a bunch of mutants?"

He smiled. "Sure. Any unexplainable differences from your average Joe Human will qualify anyone for that category and you have a couple."

Andi pushed her empty cup to one side. "I won't train children to be killers, Ben."

"No, and that's not what I'm saying. We just want to insert you as a coach, have you build a rapport with the kids and simply be helpful to Dr. Xavier--just go with the flow. Besides you love kids and I'm sure they 'd love you."

"A surrogate mom too?"

Ben shrugged. "Whatever works."

She let out a resigned sigh and looked away. "I'll have to think it over," she finally replied.

"You need to hear the rest first."

"More? What else do you want?"

"Jack."

Andi looked completely taken aback. "What?"

"Your son's done his four years. Convince him to surrender his commission and partner with you at Dr. Xavier's school as a coach."

Andi frowned. "I don't see why. One military background ought to be enough."

"We want him because he's a combat chopper pilot and we want you to bring that helicopter you happen to have for---ah, operational support for Dr. Xavier. His military expertise is a plus. You can be a team."

"You're crazy," she replied coolly. "I don't have a helicopter."

Ben whispered, "You may not *own* one, but you know where one very special helicopter is and it's built for surveillance and speed--just what Xavier can use."

Andi snorted. "And if Jack says no?"

Ben shrugged. "Then I guess you'll just have to bring it alone. Besides, how long do you think he'll be able to hide his lack of aging in the service?" Then he suddenly said, "You did tell him didn't you?"

Andi rolled her eyes heavenward. "Of course, I told him, Ben."

He looked relieved. "It's time you re-located too, Andi--for the same reasons. Your kids are grown and out on their own. Nothing's holding you here."

"I still have to think about it."

"There's one more thing. Dr. Xavier is a powerful telepath. We'd like you let him help you expand your perceptual mental abilities---hopefully to the point of being able to locate and differentiate among mutants, maybe even enhance your defensive skills. Who knows? The possibilities are endless. Besides, with no real mutant power, you'll need an edge."

She was reaching exasperation. "Is that everything?"

Ben nodded.

"Are you absolutely sure?"

He nodded again, smiling, reminding her of a crocodile in the sun. She stood to leave. He pulled an envelope from inside his jacket and held it out to her. "Here's details you can look over while you're thinking."

She stared at it warily, then at him. "What if I say no?"

"That's your choice. But keep in mind these kids won't be getting a choice--- a war *is* coming, and they're going to be in the middle of it---with you or without you, Andi. You can play see-no-evil if you want---or you can help them get through it. And, like I said, you need to relocate anyway."

She glared at him darkly. "You're playing me--you know I'm a sucker for kids."

His crocodile smile merely widened. "I'll call you in about a week and we can discuss the finer points and any questions you might have."

She snatched the envelope, gave him a sour look and stalked out the coffee shop. He'd seemed different years before. Kinder, more emphatic, but then again, maybe that's what she'd wanted to see.

His eyes admiringly followed her until she was lost from sight, then he grabbed the tab to pay for their coffees. He looked at the figures without seeing them, lost in regret that he'd had to put his job of recruiting her above his personal desires to woo her. But that's how it had to be, at least for now. He disgustedly threw down a few dollars and tip. He *had* to push her. He *had* to recruit her and, according to his employers, only some had this rare potential ability for linking into ancestral mind and *They* wanted her in Charles Xavier's hands.

Ben left the coffee shop grimly sure Andi would take the job. Her heart wouldn't let her do otherwise and with her in the bag, that only left Xavier.

Chapter 2

Closing the two file folders, Dr. Charles Xavier studied Benjamin Weir seated across from him. A week hadn't even passed since the Liberty Island incident with Magneto. Now suddenly this snappy Virginia lawyer had popped out of the woodwork claiming he represented certain anonymous parties who shared Xavier's ideals about mutants and mankind and wished to offer a resource, two people he termed as "consultants". Xavier gave Weir's thoughts a cursory scan, but found he was the intermediary he said he was with only an impersonal connection to his clients. He knew no names or faces. The people he represented were a cloud of mystery even to him, though he truly believed the consultants he offered were quality people.

Weir's silk suit rustled as he re-crossed his legs, the office permeated by his expensive cologne. "Well, Professor?"

Xavier looked down at the pair of files again. They were resumes of experience. The proposed consultants were both Naval Academy grads. Both had Military service records. Both were helicopter pilots. The woman was a licensed PI. Weir had conveniently provided complete credentials to hire them as athletic instructors. According to him, they both possessed a genetic irregularity giving them extended lifetimes. "DNA based fountains of youth" he called it. He saw Weir knew he possessed this same quality and in fact pre-dated him in age, though Xavier couldn't quite categorize him. Somehow, he didn't feel quite like a mutant, yet clearly was more than the average human.

Weir had really played up their skills with kids, particularly boasting about Andi's parental experience. "After all," he'd purred, "Andi raised three of her own and what better qualification could you have than that?" He also emphasized the bonus item that would come with these two "consultants" which was: a one of the kind, supersonic combat helicopter. "Though it's thirty years old," Weir had granted, "and needs some refurbishing."

Xavier leafed through each file again thoughtfully. First, he considered Scott Summers. Barely twenty-four, Scott had an innate gift for strategy and he'd done his best to develop it, at least intellectually, using chess, books and computer simulations. Still, the young man was a diamond in the rough, raw and unseasoned. These consultants had military field experience. Certainly, Xavier thought hopefully, they could provide the final polish Scott needed...if he could convince him to be open to them. He considered Logan, still gone in the far north. The woman had extensive investigative experience and Xavier conceded, for Logan's case, that could also be extremely useful.

Then he considered the children. An expanded athletic program would be good for them. Scott did the best he could, but academics were more his strength and Weir had a point in saying, "Life is more than coping with mutant gifts." He also promised his consultants could both handle teaching sports and personal defense. "Andi's has a considerable range of hand-to-hand fighting skills. Special forces trained."

Naturally, Xavier's brows rose at that.

Weir anticipated his question. "She'll have to explain."

Weir also pointed out that Andi's son, Jack, could box. "Imagine that as part of your athletic program?" he'd said. And Xavier could. He knew his team's weakness was relying too exclusively on their gifts, the Magneto incident having proved that and he could only blame himself. It was something these consultants might help change. Finally, he considered the virtues of this helicopter. "Imagine how you could use a maneuverable bird like that, Professor." Weir had said, "Just jet in, watch and listen to enemy activity, take pictures if you like, then jet back, unseen, unheard." Xavier could envision its uses and coveted seeing such a craft, though he wondered how such an obviously valuable military craft came into private possession.

Weir, who'd been waiting patiently, noticed Xavier close the folders again. "They can be here within a week," he prompted, "if you give the okay."

"And if it doesn't work out?"

"They're yours, Professor, to do with as you wish, but I think you'll find they *will* work out. This is a win-win scenario, Professor---for you, for them, for the kids, for everyone. It's a match made in heaven."

Despite his reservations, he finally nodded and set the dossiers aside.

Benjamin Weir stood and offered his hand. Xavier took it. "You won't regret this, Professor," Weir assured. "I'll stay touch," then strode out.

Xavier silently pondered what he just committed to, questions bobbing around in his mind like marker buoys, particularly that funny sense of neither normal nor mutant Weir had. He decided he'd better have Jean run a full exam on those two consultants and maybe get a handle on it.

As promised, Andi Ravannisky promptly arrived in the late afternoon four days later. She pulled onto school grounds in a black king-cab truck towing a flatbed trailer loaded with a covered vehicle, hopped out of the cab and came into the school. Xavier's reservations eased as soon as he met her. She had a nice sense of integrity about her. They shook hands and he introduced her to Scott, Jean and Storm.

After escorting her on the grand tour of the facility, he lead the way to his office, then dismissing everyone but Scott, they discussed logistics for the arriving helicopter. Andi's son, Jack Smith, who was flying her, was due in between one and two in the morning and would radio when he was within fifty miles for a directional beacon. Scott would need to move the jet to create adequate space to allow Jack to slip the newcomer in the hangar and set off to prepare. It would be a tight maneuver, but not impossible. In his own mind, Scott had mixed feelings about these two coming on-board. On one hand, he was glad to have two more teachers on staff to help lighten the load, but on the other, their military backgrounds intimidated him. As a pilot, next to Jack Smith, he was just a glorified bus driver and Andi had been part of some secret special forces training experiment. Awed by their experience, he had gnawing questions about how he'd fit in with them, how they'd accept him as their leader and even if that position would even remain his.

Meanwhile, over tea in his office, Xavier and Andi explored her and Jack's future at his school. They threw around ideas about athletics for the kids, how to build his X-men into a team and how the helicopter could be used and it's re-fitting needs. In particular, he asked her to initiate some defense training for his people and set to paper a tentative schedule of PE classes. Then they negotiated hiring and salary terms and he learned then, that Weir, in his continuing capacity as an intermediary, had already purchased homes for both her and Jack in town. He scanned her mind and found that same puzzling sense of "not quite mutant" he'd gotten from Weir, though he could still fit her in as a mutant even so. He perceived her straight-forwardness and sense of honor, but was particularly touched by her warm compassion for children. She truly had a mother's heart and if there were any other agenda's involved, she didn't know them. Satisfied, Xavier spoke to her mind, *"I understand I'm to help you develop your mental abilities then?"*

Startled at hearing someone in her thoughts, she thought back, *"So, I've been told---though, I'm not really telepathic, Professor---not like you. It's more a strong intuition, like sensing someone standing behind a door even though I can't see them--that sort of thing. Ben said mutant recognition and differentiation might be possible."* She shrugged.

Xavier saw in her thoughts a memory of a silver-haired Chinese man she knew as Mr. Lei, teaching her to channel her emerging mental powers into her fighting techniques and saving her from the frequent migraines those errant powers were causing. He also saw she knew Weir from a past meeting, when he'd been in Lei's service, though she was uncertain who he served now. He withdrew then, not wanting to pry further.

"Ben said I'd need an edge," she thought to him, smiling wryly.

Out-loud, Xavier asked, "And what do you think?"

"I think we'll do whatever we can, Professor."

Chapter 3

When Scott let them know Jack radioed in, Xavier and Andi promptly headed for the hanger. Scott had activated a beacon to guide him in and, by the time they'd arrived, had opened the hanger doors. Within minutes a sleek Bell helicopter hovered quietly above the opening, then slipped delicately through and settled into the bay where Scott directed, her powerful down-wash forcing them to stay against the wall.

Xavier stared with admiration at the craft as the turbines cut and blades slowed, then he and Andi moved toward the chopper, while Scott trotted back to hit the close switch for the upper-doors. The copter's door hissed open. The pilot removed his helmet and re-settled a faded camouflage cap over his blonde crew cut, then hopped from the cockpit, a black satchel in hand. Dressed in worn jungle fatigues, plain t-shirt and a brown bomber jacket, Jack ducked the blades and strode briskly toward them.

Andi embraced her oldest boy happily. "No problems?"

"Piece of cake," Jack pronounced as he returned the embrace.

Andi stepped aside to introduce him to Xavier. "Jack, this is Professor Charles Xavier. Professor, my son, Jack Smith."

Jack's blonde goatee broke into a broad grin as they shook hands, though his steely blue eyes remained coolly appraising.

Xavier immediately recognized the look of a young man made old and sage by war. It was a soldier's look, a look Scott didn't have yet and he dreaded the crucible that would put it on him. He indicated Scott, standing quietly beside him. "This is Scott Summers. He was my first pupil." Scott came forward, politely offering his hand and Jack shook it affably. "He flies the jet," Xavier said, indicating the sleek Blackbird on the far side of the bay. "And leads my team."

Jack and Andi looked at the jet, then at Scott again, their inquiring gaze making him slightly uncomfortable. He forced a smile, glad the Professor had made the pecking order clear. "So, could you use a hand working on your copter?"

Jack grinned. "Sure. The old Lady needs all the help she can get."

Sensing their tiredness, Xavier said, "Scott will show you to your rooms."

Leading the way through the white corridors, Scott was immediately fascinated by Jack and Andi's mother-son relationship. The proud maternal look in her eyes, the way they touched and the understanding they seemed to share touched something indefinable in his soul.

The next morning, Xavier took Jack and Andi from class to class introducing them to the children and announcing the new PE schedules. They lunched in the cafeteria together joined by Scott, Jean and Storm. After that he turned them over to Dr. Gray for exams.

Jean did a full scan and DNA work-up on Andi and Jack. Now, Xavier surveyed their scans on the light panels with one burning question on his mind. "Are our new friends mutants or not?"

"I don't know," Jean answered, a perplexed wrinkle on her fine brow. "Neither have the x-gene in their DNA, yet they both still have peculiarities I can't explain any other way."

"Like delayed aging," he mused, remembering Weir calling it a "DNA based fountain of youth."

Jean nodded. "Andi's legal birth date is nineteen-fifty-eight, which makes her fifty-seven in real time."

"Yet she looks thirty." Xavier finished. "And Jack?"

"Born in nineteen-eighty-eight. He's really twenty-seven, but Andi thinks he has the trait."

"What other peculiarities are we talking about?"

"A thirty to forty percent stronger bone density than yours or mine," she said, tapping a skeletal image on the light panel with her pen.

"Did they know they had this peculiarity?"

She shook her head. "Apparently not. Though, both say they've never broken anything and their x-rays agree."

Xavier was thoughtful. "What benefits might come from such a build?"

"Probably an above average impact resistance to blows or falls. It makes them weigh slightly more for their height, build and body fat, too."

"What else?"

"They both claim they've experienced rapid recovery from injuries and immunity to illness---but I can't verify that just now."

Xavier nodded. "And Andi has a paranormal perceptual ability. So, all in all, we have are two people who fit here even if we don't know why."

"So it seems."

"Care to share your impression of them?"

Jean cocked her head to the right as she always did when thinking. "Warm. Friendly. They both have an impetuous spirit of fun about them and seem to have a nice relationship together. It might be good for the children to see a positive mother-son example."

Xavier nodded. "Charismatic is the word that came to mind when I met them. Do you like them?"

Jean smiled thoughtfully. "Actually, I do."

"So do I."

Andi and Jack were in bright and early Monday morning to begin their new routines. Xavier asked Andi to see him in his office the first hour before classes for two purposes; one was to begin her mental training and the other was to explain Logan's circumstances and ask her to about tracing his background.

Andi gave a low whistle as she accepted Logan's file. "Whew, fifteen years! And virtually nothing but guesswork to go on." She shook her head as she scanned the notes. "And you say you've sent him back to

Canada to check out an abandoned military facility near an adamantium mine?" Xavier nodded. She snapped the file shut. "I doubt he'll find much." She shook her head disparagingly again. "This is deep and it's old, Professor. The trail's pretty cold." She set the file on the edge of his desk and clasped her hands in her lap. "I don't know how much I can do with it."

"I promised we'd try to find him answers," Xavier replied with unswerving firmness.

Andi's eyes rested on the file a moment and he could see her calculating possibilities. When she looked up again, there was commitment in her eyes. "Well, I've got a couple ideas---I'll see what I can turn up. No promises, though."

He nodded. "I understand. Do your best." After that, he the next hour helping her to begin "feeling" with her mind the mutant students and staff around school. That hour between seven and eight became their daily weekday training time, then at eight she met Jack in either the weight room or gym to work-out before their PE classes at ten.

To Charles Xavier's great delight, the students took to Andi and Jack like ducks to water and neither seemed the least bit intimidated by their mutant charges. Their presence slipped an element of the 'drill-sergeant' into the school climate as they called each child "Mr" or "Miss" and required responses of "Sir" or "Ma'am". Kids, even if they are mutants, still act like kids and he was very pleased with their innovative disciplinary responses such as Saturday stall-mucking duty to large offenses like hallway fights or sending lunch-line rough-housers to the end of the line.

Jack was also the first soldier any of them had ever met, making his war stories in constant demand and inspiring them with having done something so "normal", so unreachable for a 'mutant.' He overheard one youngster ask Jack if he "might be a Marine when he grew up" to which Jack replied by having him show him a bicep, pinch it and answer, "Well, Marine, you'll need a lot more muscle first." His military catch phrases, acronyms and lingo, like calling bathrooms "the head," were being rapidly adopted.

Besides her extensive military background, Andi offered one thing more. She had a maternal nurturing quality that drew the children like flies to honey. Even the difficult ones, like Jubilee, or the estranged, like Rogue. She had an infectious warmth and an encouraging way. For Rogue, who was still reticent about PE participation, Andi made sure she had gym clothing she felt secure in and enticed her to become her class assistant, gradually increasing her involvement and her trust. For the younger ones, such as their most recent and youngest addition, Elliot, she was a lap, a hug, a story, a keeper of whispered childish secrets or a song and a kiss good night. He sensed she'd fallen in love with them and he was deeply grateful her gifts so readily filled the gaps he so keenly knew existed and couldn't fill.

Then there was Scott, whom he observed with special interest, always hovering on the fringes of Andi's activities with the children, to all appearances not watching, when, in fact, Xavier knew he was. A shy, sensitive soul, Scott's lonely childhood and frequent rejections for adoption had left deep scars, scars even beyond the reach of all he'd tried to do these past eight years, scars Scott compensated for in academic success and stoic self-discipline. He felt that perhaps, Scott might surmount his inner-barriers if Andi could reach him somehow. He sensed she might be able to do Scott a world of good. To that end then, Xavier did everything he could to encourage their relationship. He suggested Scott work with her on Airwolf's fiber-optic system and they spent hours pouring over the Lady's original schematics, planning and re-drafting her system. He further assigned Andi to train Scott, Jean and Storm in some basic contact fighting after class hours, three times a week for six weeks, suggesting she work with them alone the first couple weeks to help smooth out their reception of her and Jack as instructors.

Below the school, Andi sighed into her seat in front of her computer. When she wasn't teaching PE or contact fighting or helping this or that student, or re-fitting Airwolf or a myriad other things, then she had free time to work on Logan's case. It was a troublesome bit of work, too. Every question only led to more questions.

Andi pulled his file up. Naturally, she'd immediately hacked into both Canadian military and intelligence files as a routine starting place. She understood by experience what it was like to have an erased history. Her own military record was a perfect example. It reported her assigned places she never saw, with reports written by commanders she never knew, doing jobs she never had. In truth, she'd been recruited directly after graduation from Annapolis for a secret experiment in training women for special forces work. It was some visionary politicians idea and because it was also illegal, they had to be clandestinely flown blind-folded to

an abandoned military facility in the middle of nowhere, where special forces volunteers from several branches trained them. The "survivors" then won an assignment to their respective instructors teams. She ended up on a SEALs team working covert assignments to hide her presence. Unfortunately, two years later, they were exposed by a devious enemy and, in lieu of a public court martial, everyone was quietly discharged, except her commander who served a prison sentence and they were all sworn to silence, their lives erased on paper.

Of course, she found nothing on Logan in the Canadian files she searched. The Canadian military and intelligence communities were well-known for being more forthright than most and for all intents and purposes, both their mission statements completely opposed what Logan's case implicated. Not to mention the fact his so-called dog-tags weren't military tags at all. So, she'd turned then to adamantium shipping stats as a slightly more promising angle. The good news about adamantium was its high trace-ability. Since its properties made it ideal for military technology, international law mandated none could be produced without license nor shipped without registration of origin and receiver, though this excluded the black market. She didn't know what she was looking for or what she'd find. It was just another place to start.

She also had one other wild idea---if she could get Rogue to part with Logan's tags for a day. Fortunately, Rogue was interested in whatever might help her friend, so borrowing the tags wasn't a problem. Andi didn't tell her precisely what she was going to do with them. She didn't tell anyone. She just made the appointment for Saturday and drove off to New York, tags in hand, early Saturday morning.

Chapter 4

Professor Xavier saw Andi later that evening headed for the Rec-room. Her expression was serious and drawn. Quite the opposite of her normal energetic and light spirit. With furrowed brow, he hummed after her, arriving in the Rec-room in time to see her hand something to Rogue. *Logan's dog-tags*, he thought. She and Rogue exchanged a few words, then seeing him, she came over. "Do you know if Jack is still here, Professor?" she asked tiredly.

"Downstairs working on the helicopter, I believe." She nodded. "I'm going that way anyway," Xavier added, "I'll accompany you to the elevator."

Andi hesitated slightly, then nodded again. Xavier hummed along beside her down the hall until they reached the elevator. Before she could enter, he said, "You seem...not yourself. Are you all right?"

She looked down at him a moment, then away as if seeing some far away dream. "I'd like to share it with you later, Professor," she murmured.

"Alright then. Good-night." He heard the elevator close as he rolled away. She was definitely troubled.

As soon as he crossed the New York state-line, Logan started imagining every criticism of laser-eye would throw at him about "borrowing" his bike and dreaming-up equally nasty come-backs. He idly wondered if some kind of salary would come along with staying on as part of their little team. He'd left without even asking about such details. Well, he'd have to insist on something. He needed his own bike. He needed his independence. And he *wasn't* mucking-out the stables to earn it either.

He pulled into the Xavier's School for the Gifted in the dark hours of Monday morning. At least he knew the gate security code and still had a house-key. He parked the bike outside where Scott would surely see it, let himself in and, quietly as the creaky floor allowed, went to the same room he'd had before. He cautiously peeked in to make sure it was still empty, then went in, shut and locked the door, gently sat his back-pack on the floor, took off only what was absolutely necessary and threw himself on the bed face first, exhausted.

Eventually sounds of exuberant life in the outer hallways gradually drifted into his awareness. He squinted at the clock on the bed stand, but its red digital face was turned away. Reluctantly, with a grunt, he reached out and turned it toward him. It said three o'clock. He plunged his head into the pillow again. Afternoon or night? He squinted at the clock again. PM. He put the pillow over his head. Finally, throwing it off, he flopped over, stared at the ceiling and wondered how he was ever going to manage relating to all these kids---he couldn't even remember being one. Then, groaning off the bed, he headed for the shower. He needed to see Xavier, Rogue, Jean and eat dinner--not necessarily in that order.

Scott, of course, had seen his bike parked outside first thing, caked with road grime. To Jean, his stony silence was eloquent enough and she gently steered him away from the window and re-directed his attention to tasks at hand. With Logan back now, she was grateful she'd had Andi to talk to these past two weeks. Not

that the Professor hadn't always tried to be helpful, but he was not a woman and she 'd desperately needed a woman with relationship experience to confide in and found it in Andi. Twice married, Andi listened to her pour out all her doubts, her fears, her confusion and her tears, then helped her evaluate everything, helped her figure out Scott was the one she really wanted to go through life with. Plus she gave her a few communication tips to help smooth things out a bit. Jean wished she could get Scott into these conversations too, but knew he had a shyness about that sort of thing and he'd gotten even more self-conscious around Andi and Jack ever since the team's Magneto mission evaluation. Despite their ample praise for everything successful, Jack and Andi's questions had brought every strategic weakness of that night painfully to light. Jack had been particularly hard on Scott about not carrying spare glasses, saying "If his team had to lead him around blind, he was a liability." Scott had gone to bed sullen and withdrawn that night.

Logan was startled to find Professor Xavier waiting immediately outside his bedroom door.

"Good afternoon, Logan," he said cheerily. "Sleep well?"

"Uh-huh."

"Come, I want to introduce you to our two new staff."

Reluctantly, Logan followed him. As they walked along the shiny white corridors, Xavier told him about Jack and Andi, their military backgrounds, their role as PE instructors and that they were engaged in re-fitting a stealth helicopter he was about to show him. The hanger doors opened and deafening rock n' roll greeted them.

Xavier pointed at the black helicopter. "This is Airwolf," he shouted above the din, "She's armored. Runs silent. Repels radar detection. Flies supersonic."

From the copters far side, a startled blonde goateed-face suddenly peered through openings once occupied by doors and seeing them, immediately reduced the volume. He was wiping his hands on a rag as they came around. "Hi, Professor."

"Jack, this is Logan," Xavier introduced. "Logan, Jack Smith."

Their eyes met and Logan immediately saw in Jack a friendly, confident man with nothing to prove and instantly liked.

Grinning, Jack held out a hand, "Welcome back, Logan."

Logan shook it, then allowed his eyes to roam over the helicopter's state of dismemberment. It looked gutted. Seats gone. Wiring everywhere. A work table that extended out of the wall was covered with laptop computers, blueprints and books. Junk was everywhere. Finally his gaze settled back on the baseball-capped young man slouched against the copter's side. "So," Logan cynically jabbed, "let me guess---you quit the Marines to 'join the team' and be an 'X-men'?"

Jack smiled wryly. "Nope. I quit the Marines to fly the fastest helicopter ever built." He patted the copter's plating. Then with a smirk, added, "Besides, I thought the X-men thing was *your* job and *my* job is providing you air-to-ground support---at least that will be my job--after we're finished re-fitting her."

Xavier interrupted their parrying. "And that is where I think you might come in, Logan. You have some mechanical ability, I'd like you to help Jack."

Logan looked incredulous. "Yeah, with motorcycles maybe, but I don't know anything about...about..." and he gesticulated at the helicopter.

"Jet Turbines." Jack filled in, then shrugged. "I've been learning-by-doing these past couple years. And we have all the specs." He waved toward the paper-covered work table. "Besides, it's not like we can take her someplace else to be worked on---she's one of a kind and not supposed to exist."

He eyed Airwolf shrewdly, then Jack and Xavier. "You stole this didn't you?"

"Well, yes and no. The whole story is so long and bizarre," Jack countered, it can only be told fairly over three or four beers. In fact, it's best told by Mom. She was flying this baby when I was in diapers." He patted her black side affectionately, then looked at Xavier. "Have you...?" he began, beginning a question of whether his Mother had been introduced, but Xavier's negative head shake stopped him. Jack chuckled. "It will make more sense after you've been around Mom."

"That's our next stop," Xavier said, smiling. He started to wheel away, then stopped, looked back. "Will you be at dinner?"

Jack shook his head. "No, sir. I'm working straight through." He glanced at his watch. "I'll probably cut out around seven or so."

Xavier nodded, "Good night, then. See you tomorrow."

"Good-night." Jack replied absently, returning his attention to examining the lower port turbine. He'd cannibalized the lower turbines for the sake of the upper ones and needed to order new parts.

Music was blasting away before they reached the doors and in the gleaming white corridor again, Logan couldn't resist a sarcastic, "So where's Dad?"

"Andi's a widow," Xavier replied, putting him to silence. "I'd like you to work with Jack in the athletic program as well, Logan."

"Are we talking about a paid position?"

"I'm sure we can negotiate something agreeable." Xavier stopped outside another lab door. "Before we go in, I should warn you one of Andi's project is tracing what happened to you fifteen years ago."

With an arched brow he followed the Professor in.

A woman was rocked back in her chair in front of double computer screens, hands clasped behind her head, one Nike heel resting on the counter while the other rested on the floor. She was watching the busy screens. She wore her long hair pulled through the back of a Levi baseball cap and was wearing simple jeans with a sweatshirt, her coach's whistle still around her neck. A big, pink bubble expanded from her lips and burst just as they entered. Casually dropping her foot to the floor, she swung toward them. "Hey, Professor."

Logan was immediately startled. He'd pictured a robust, maybe graying woman with matronly tendencies---not this--this trim pretty gal who didn't look a day past thirty and *couldn't* possibly be mother of a child Jack's age.

"Oh," Xavier murmured, perceiving Logan's surprise, "Did I forget to mention? Andi and Jack don't age at the same rate as the rest of us---a little like you I might add." Then he introduced them. "Andi, this is Logan and Logan, Andi."

Andi rose and extended her hand. Logan grasped it automatically, still stunned.

"You look different with skin on," she commented wryly, thinking him handsome in a werewolf-biker sort of way.

"Huh?"

"I've only seen your x-rays."

"Oh." He regained enough presence of mind to release her hand.

"Well," Xavier said, "I've leave you two to talk things over," and hummed out the door.

Andi pushed a chair around for him as she back in her seat again. Logan dropped into it, surveying her work station. "So, what exactly are you doing?"

"Compositing sixteen year old shipping lists of adamantium throughout Canada. By law, there has to be a record of anyone who legally handled it. Mines, processors, transporters, receivers, whatever."

"And you think you can trace it back to the buyer?"

Andi shrugged. "Maybe his middleman. Some innocuous facility that could receive it without question. Maybe someone might remember how it was picked up and by who. Of course, that doesn't include black market movement---if they used that, I'm out of luck."

Logan played with a pen on the counter. "That's *a lot* of maybe's."

"Maybe so," she smiled. "You could help by marking this map with all the earliest towns or other locations you can remember passing through, so I can establish search parameters." She shoved over to the far side of the keyboard, tapped up an enlarged map of northwestern Canada on the second computer screen, then gestured for him to roll over in front of it.

He felt inept with computers. "What do you want me to do?"

"Take this stylus," Andi instructed, "And just mark on the screen." She handed it to him. "I'll adjust the map to any size or any region you need--just tell me."

He peered at the screen, asked for an area magnification and tried to concentrate on his earliest recollections. Instead, he was distracted by her scent. With every breath he inhaled her. Not an artificial perfume, but rather a natural, barely discernable, indescribable kind of sweetness. He was also aware of her closeness, her arm draped over his chair-back, leaning in to see the screen beside him.

"Hard time remembering?" she asked.

"Fifteen years is a long time and I was kind of shook-up back then," he exaggerated to cover his hesitation. Forcing himself to focus on the map, he was able to note quite a few places, then they pushed apart, though her scent lingered in his nostrils.

"How was your trip to Alkali Lake?" she asked.

"Long, cold and unproductive."

He noticed for a moment her face took on a sudden serious expression with an intense, haunted gaze, but she seemed to shake herself out of it and a smile returned.

"No one seemed to care about you poking around up there then?"

"Only the guys using that old base for black market weapons depot."

Andi grabbed a pad and pen and made a note.

"Is that important?"

She shrugged. "You never know what might be useful."

"So, what if this adamantium trace doesn't work out?"

"Well, I have a couple ideas." She gave him a speculative look, tapping her lips thoughtfully with the stylus, then pointed it at him. "Your case has a lot of oddities, Logan."

"No kidding."

"For one thing your dog-tags aren't right for simple military tags. The information is too incomplete. Just a name and number. Maybe you're a prisoner they hijacked for experimentation and this was a project name and code. Or how about a hijacked mental patient? Unfortunately, you pre-date the standardized DNA registration of inmates and psychos, so those "maybe's" aren't very traceable."

Logan scoffed.

"Oh, come on, you don't think you were some mild-mannered insurance salesman before this do you? They didn't delete your whole personality---you've probably always been short-fused. I'll bet you've seen the inside of a jail more than a couple times, haven't you?"

A cocky smile spread over his lips. "You Yanks have an expression for not admitting something."

"Taking the Fifth?"

"That's it. I'm taking the Fifth."

He realized she wasn't listening anymore as a haunted look passed rapidly over her face again like she was experiencing some kind of intense inner-struggle. Logan gently waved his hand past her eyes and her eyes snapped back into focus. He couldn't read the expression in them and neither could he look away. She abruptly checked at her watch. "Say, you hungry? It's dinnertime." She stood without waiting for an answer and grabbed her jacket, only pausing long enough for him to get in stride with her. On the way upstairs, she asked, "Did the professor happen to mention helping Jack and me with PE?"

"He mentioned it."

"Did you talk about any details? Like when he wants you to start or anything?"

Logan shrugged. "I guess I can start anytime. When did you have in mind?"

"Ten o'clock tomorrow morning."

Chapter 5

They walked the rest of the way to the cafeteria in relative silence, each reflecting on their own private thoughts, his being mostly about food since he could smell the delectable scents long before they reached the cafeteria. He and Andi were among the last stragglers in the serving line. As soon as they entered the doorway, calls of "Hi, Coach" rang out from the nearest table-load of kids and she waved and smiled in response. He saw Rogue across the room seated with her friends and, upon seeing him, she immediately came over.

He was glad to see her looking so happy and rosy-cheeked and smiled on her. "Hey, kid."

"I see ya'll 'ave met." She removed the chain from her neck and held out Logan's tags.

He graciously took them and re-fastened them around his own. "Thanks for keeping them for me."

She smiled, then looked to Andi. "Is Coach Jack comin' ta supper, too?"

Logan replied before Andi could. "I heard him say he wasn't."

Rogue seemed disappointed. Logan grinned. "Say, you're going to have to start calling me Coach Logan now."

Casting a back-glance at her table of friends, she replied, "Well than, I s'pose I'll be seein' you later--- Coach."

"I think you're off the hook infatuation-wise," Andi murmured when Rogue left. He raised his brows questioningly. "Jack's her new crush," she whispered. "Besides I believe he's a lot closer to her age than you."

Logan just snorted, though he was secretly relieved.

Joining Xavier, Storm, Scott and Jean at the staff table, Logan steeled himself for verbal combat. Andi sat beside Scott, who rose politely at her approach and held her chair, while Logan settled beside Storm, across from Andi, observing as he did so that Scott had strategically barricaded Jean between himself and Xavier.

For spite mostly, Logan winked at her. His torch for her seemed much less bright then before.

"So, you're back," Scott stated with icy politeness.

"Miss me?" Logan smirked back.

"Like a toothache."

"So," Storm interrupted with forced cheeriness, "what did you find at Alkali Lake?"

"Snow," Logan answered, mouth full. "Lots of snow." He swallowed. "And trouble. Lots of trouble." He glimpsed Andi gazing aside, still and lost with that spooky look that seemed to consume her.

"What kind of trouble?" a voice asked, dragging his attention back. It was Xavier.

"Gun runners using the old base as a depot. That's it."

"I'm sorry it you didn't find more," Xavier apologized.

Logan shrugged. "I had a few loose ends to tie-up anyway. Accounts to settle. It worked out."

Andi's fork suddenly clattered onto her plate and she glanced quickly at Xavier. He'd called to her mind, bringing her back. Because he could read her mind, he was the only one who truly knew what she'd experienced and why it stalked her distractedly.

Just then a small voice said, "Miss Andi?"

Their attention fell on slender, black boy of about nine with thick, round glasses standing between her and Scott.

"Yes, Sweetie," she smiled. "What is it?"

"Would you help me with my math homework tonight?" He poked his glasses back up his nose.

"Well, Elliot, thank you for asking, but you know what?" His little face stared adoringly into hers as he shook his head. "Math isn't my strength," she replied, which wasn't entirely true, but she didn't want responsibility for everything. "Now, Mr Summers here---he's the math wiz."

Elliot drooped and slumped against her side. "But I wanted *you* to help me."

Andi put her arm around him. "Elliot," she murmured "When we need help, we ask people who're good at the thing we need help with. Do you ask a dentist to fix air-conditioners?" Elliot shook his head. "Do you call a plumber to do brain surgery?" He smiled this time and shook his head. "So if you need math help, who should you ask?"

"Mr. Summers," Elliot whispered in reply, starting to twist shyly back and forth in her arm.

"So, do you have something to ask Mr. Summers?"

Elliot twisted toward Scott and said, "Mr. Summers, would you help me with my math homework tonight?"

Scott leaned eye level with Elliot, smiling broadly. "I'd be glad to, Elliot."

"Very good," Andi said giving him a final squeeze, "I'll see you later to say good-night." She released him and the satisfied child ran off.

"He seems awfully little," Logan remarked.

"He's nine and the youngest here," Xavier told him. "He had what we call a "break-out". A sudden violent and uncontrollable burst of a mutant ability precipitated by extreme trauma. In Elliot's case, his mother's boyfriend's constant abuse of them triggered a telekinetic response so forceful he killed him. His mother abandoned Elliot to legal and social services until I was able to rescue him. He wasn't even speaking when I brought him here."

"We try to keep things as low stress as possible to prevent further break-outs," Jean added, "until he's older and we can train him to control his power."

Finished with dinner, Scott and Jean excused themselves, though Scott left her a moment to say one last thing to Logan, who was in line behind a couple students awaiting his turn to dispose of his dinnerware. With his hands clasped behind him, Scott leaned close to Logan's ear. "I trust you're planning on returning my bike to the same condition it was when you borrowed it."

Logan whipped up a mock salute. "Yes sir, Mr. Summers."

With his lips compressed grimly in self-control, Scott just spun on his heel, collected Jean on his arm and left.

Logan grinned wickedly after him.

Scott hurried with Jean to catch up with Professor Xavier humming along ahead of them. He stopped and wheeled around to face them. "Yes, Scott?"

"Should I tell Logan to start joining us for defense training?" Though "order" was more what he had in mind.

"No, I don't think that will be necessary. I want him to have a chance to find his niche and grow into belonging here. I've asked him to work on Airwolf with Jack. I think they'll get along well."

"As opposed to not getting along with me." Scott retorted.

Xavier smiled encouragingly. "Well, Rome wasn't built in a day. In time, I think he'll blend in and make a nice addition to the team. Give him time, Scott."

Meanwhile, Logan, since he hadn't *actually* given the bike back yet, decided a final joy ride might be in order. So, he trailed behind the crowd, then quietly broke away, got his jacket, slipped outside, jumped on Scott's bike and rode to town to find someplace to have a drink and a smoke. He was sure that anal little twerp would make sure he didn't have access to it again anytime soon, but had no idea where his decision to join up with Xavier's cause was going to lead.

Continued in chapter 11-16...