

With This Ring by B. Nickerson {Rated PG}

Synopsis: Logan, Jack & Alex treat Scott to a bachelor party he'll not likely forget!

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Scott hurried downstairs with the note from Hezekiah Lei. Andi looked up as he strode in, unsurprised, since Xavier had already forewarned her. Scott, his face flushed with intensity, thrust the paper into her outstretched hand and flopped into the chair beside her. She scanned the note briefly, then keyed in Tau Omega's web address. In seconds it connected, presenting Tau Omega International's clean, simple home-page and neat coat-of-arms logo on her screen. Under the logo was their missions statement that read, "A company offering control for a changing world," and two link buttons. Andi clicked the "About Us" button first and it popped up a description of what the corporation was offering, which boiled down to nothing more than a large-scale mutant location and ID service. They limited themselves to working on a national level, though, clearly stating they were hireable only by a government and included a disclaimer that they were an independent service not responsible for any country's national policies or what was done with the information they provided.

"Convenient," Scott snorted.

Andi tapped the next line of the company blurb with her stylus. "Check this out."

Scott read it aloud. "Though the Tau Omega corporation cannot respond to individual mutant complaints, we will collect such complaints and forward them to their proper national authorities." He whistled softly. "Looks like they've covered all their bases."

"It certainly does," Andi agreed. She clicked the contact link. It just listed Tau's business office address in Zurich, their phone and fax numbers and an e-mail form for countries to apply on with a secondary form marked "other." Andi saved and printed these pages, then exited the site, going to Zurich's city-map site, since all major cities had 3-D virtual maps. She typed Tau's office address in the "search for" space and hit enter. A 3-D image of a professional building, called Kemplar Professional Suites, sprang-up along with a list of it's current tenants, a virtual tour option of it's office space selections and a rental application. Tau Omega's name was listed alphabetically among it's many international business tenants.

"That tells us a whole lot," Scott grumbled.

Andi clucked her tongue. "It tells us more than you think." She tapped the list of tenants with her stylus. "What do you see?"

"Just a bunch of companies. What's so special about that?"

"Look again."

He squinted at the list. "Hmm, they're all large and well-known. All international. What am I supposed to see?"

"Nothing."

He gawked at her. "What?"

Andi smiled and tapped the list again. "Tau blends in with the rest."

"That's so obvious, I can't believe I didn't see it."

"There's one other thing this tells us."

Scott studied the screen again, searching it like a treasure map. "They're all rented offices. Is that it?"

"Right. And what does that mean?"

Scott shook his head.

"It means Tau can pack-up and beat it out of town fast without even a forwarding address." She clicked on the Tau listing, which identified their office manager as one Marti Rhyne, then clicked on rental applications. "And I'll bet," she added, "any Joe can rent one of these with just a credit card number." The application opened and that's exactly what it was, a rental application requiring only a credit card. She arched an eyebrow at Scott.

He half-smiled. "Okay, so can we find out who actually rented it for Tau?"

"We can try." She reached for her disc file of "tools," most custom-made for her by a friend, all highly illegal,

but effective. Between her and Xavier, the underground computer had more fire-walls than the National Security Agency and though she knew she couldn't be tracked, she still maintained a twenty second safety window to get in and get out on. She selected a mini-DSD with the trojan she wanted, loaded it and it neatly filled in the Kemplar rental application with bogus personal information and credit card number. Then she hit submit and they watched the screen. Once in, it would be able access any other account she asked for. Seconds later, the trojan's window opened requesting specific search parameters.

"Ah, we're in," she said and quickly typed in Tau Omega International. It gave her a wait box, then produced the renters name, address info and credit card number, which turned out to be Marti Rhyne. Andi saved it and cancelled the program. "Well, well," she murmured, "I should have known."

"Why?"

She tapped her stylus against her lips thoughtfully, then looked at Scott. "Here's how it works. Say, you want to set up a relatively untraceable operation. So, you hire yourself a clean-cut, college grad to be your middleman and rent your office, which put's his name on everything with no direct connection to you. Then, when it's time to cut-out, you vanish and leave him holding the bag."

"That's low," Scott replied.

"It is, but that's the game." She changed discs. "I'll go ahead and run a background check on him, but I'm pretty sure that's what he'll be, just a grad happy to have a job with benefits."

Scott suddenly jerked his wrist up and stared at his watch appalled he'd lost track of time. His auto-shop class was due to start in two minutes. He jumped up. "Oh, man, I gotta get to class! You do that background check, I'll be back after my math class later."

Andi just nodded absently as he dashed out and hurried to the garage for shop class, sure Logan would give him heck if he got there before him, but, fortunately, Logan was a couple minutes late himself and didn't notice. Later, as soon as he'd dismissed his math class, Scott stacked homework neatly aside and trailed out after his students, eager to get back downstairs to Andi. Suddenly, ahead of him, he saw Jean, lovely in her gray skirt and red silk blouse, strolling his way, smiling brightly. "Oh, shoot," he grumbled, glancing impatiently at his wristwatch. He'd completely forgotten their appointment at the bakery.

Jean greeted him with a peck on the lips. "Ready to go?"

"In a minute," he replied hastily, grabbing her hand and pulling her in the direction of the concealed elevator. "I just have one tiny quick thing to do first."

She held back. "Scott, our appointment's at three-fifteen! We really don't have time..."

"Just for a sec, honey. Lei sent us a lead and Andi's been running it and I want to hear what she found out."

Jean sighed resignedly. "Alright, but it's got to be quick!"

"It will, I promise!"

They hurried underground, making Andi look up with a start as the door slid open and they burst in. "Well?" Scott panted.

"Well, what I told you. Marti Rhyne's fresh from college and this is his first job. He's married with a infant girl. I did find out his paychecks are being funneled through a neutral company that hires out managing that sort of thing for other companies." She shrugged. "I think Mr. Rhyne's just running a clearing house for inquiries. It'd take on-site surveillance to find out more."

He looked disappointed. Jean tugged him back toward door. "Com'on, we'll be late."

"We have an appointment," he explained. "You'll pass this on to the Professor?" Andi nodded and he let Jean hurry him down the white underground corridor. They practically collided with Logan just coming out of the elevator. "Andi down here?" he asked.

Scott barely had time to nod before he was in the elevator and the doors closed. He didn't even have a chance to comment on Logan's appearance.

Andi looked up again at the sound of the door sliding open, half expecting Scott and Jean again, but instead she was pleasantly surprised to see Logan. She smiled and raised her brows at the dust and bits of spider-web he was

coated with. "Where've you been?"

He grunted as he flopped into the adjacent chair. "On the old third floor looking things over." He brushed off his shirt-sleeves and front. "What a mess."

She knew he meant the old third story of the original portion of the mansion, whose five dormers looked out over the front lawn. Each one was a good-sized bedroom, but Xavier had stripped them of furnishings years before and had left them locked until Storm recently asked if one might be fixed-up as a studio apartment for her, which, to Andi, meant Storm was looking ahead to a future with Alex. She sighed, with heavy heart. "And?"

Logan shrugged. "The wall paper needs stripping, windows need new blinds and that sixty-year old galvanized plumbing might be a problem, but other than that, it seems perfect." He arched his left brow, making her smile at his sarcasm. He suddenly grabbed her chair and turned her toward him. "How 'bout I get cleaned up and we get out of here, Angel?"

Gazing into his twinkling hazel eyes, she nodded, unable to resist being cheered-up by such an expression. He took her face in his dusty hands, gave her a wet smooch, then headed for the door. "I'll meet you upstairs in twenty minutes," he said and disappeared.

Andi sighed again as she shut down the computer, then grabbed the Tau printouts and headed upstairs to give what she had to Xavier before meeting Logan. Upstairs, Charles Xavier looked over the printouts, while listening intently to her report the same bland information she'd told Scott about Tau Omega and its office manager, Marti Rhyne. He thanked her, then, as soon as she'd left, picked up the phone and rapidly dialed his friend, Gunther Dietrich, in Germany, a telepath like himself who shared his vision and was trying to run a similar school for mutants there. Though, Lei might have encouraged him to use Weir, Xavier still didn't trust him and preferred instead to ask for help from someone he did trust. He thought Gunther might be able to better handle the in-person information gathering on Tau perhaps. As he listened to the rings, he couldn't help but wonder if they weren't all jumping from the frying pan head first into the fire.

The next evening Xavier asked Andi and Jack to fly him over Washington DC in Airwolf, since all his efforts in Cerebro thus far had produced nothing, so he could try a closer, in-person mental scan of the DC area. Using a grid-pattern, Andi and Jack flew silently from section to section, allowing Xavier to search the entire District of Columbia and all its surrounding environs, but to no avail. He found no sense of the girl anywhere and ordered Airwolf home with a heavy-heart. He didn't know, of course, that Mystique had already wisely moved her entire operation out of DC and into a rural region of northern Maryland, a sleepy farming community called John's Bridge. Using money drained from Pierian's assets, she'd rented a small farmhouse and two other residences, then divided her clan of hypnotized mutants among these residences to limit attracting any attention. She made the farmhouse her headquarters, since it was going to play heaviest in her future plan and had ordered Hypno to chaperone in one of the other residences. Thinking of him made her nose wrinkle. She despised the dwarf and only kept him around because of his hypnotic gift. She glanced at Rogue across the room, seated catatonically in front of the flashing TV screen and sneered. If everything went as planned, she'd have Magneto out by Halloween. "Not much longer, my love," she whispered.

Up on the school roof inspecting shingles later that week, Logan shook his head at himself as he walked along. He ought to have made a decision by now. Jean and Scott's wedding was just another week away, leaving only one week after before his own and he didn't even have rings picked out. He didn't know exactly how that had become his job except Andi had managed to talk him into it, though buying jewelry wasn't really his forte. Actually, he'd never done it before, but, last weekend, he'd put his best foot forward and had gone to a mall to try. It was a disaster. Not only had sheer quantity of choices overwhelmed him, but the hovering sales-girl had been overly eager to make a sale and he'd walked-out. So, now here he was, still ring-less with yet another week slipping by, walking the roofs with Jack, fixing shingles before it snowed. Everyday he'd played with the idea of asking Jack for advice, since he'd surely have some idea what Andi might like, but pride made him procrastinate. Finally he made

up his mind to risk it and Friday, at the end of the day when he and Jack were on the ground winding their safety lines he asked. "Uh, Jack," he hesitated, "I could use your help with... uh, something."

"Sure, name it."

He kept his eyes on his work. "Picking out a ring...for Andi."

Jack chuckled and Logan winced.

"Okay," Jack grinned. "How 'bout tomorrow?"

Logan nodded as he shouldered a stack of line. "That'll work."

"So, will you joining us in the gym tonight for a little dance instruction?" Jack asked, breaking into a quick salsa step.

Logan grimaced. He'd forgotten all about that. Jean and Scott were wanting Andi and Jack to give them a quick lesson for their upcoming reception. "Maybe," he grumbled, unhappy to be sacrificing yet another Friday night he'd rather have spent alone with Andi rather than on *always* doing something with Jean and Scott. Last week, it 'd been dinner at her house with those two cooking.

Logan followed Jack irritably to the shed and stowed his gear, sure he'd never met two more boring people in his life, which was ironic, considering how taken he'd originally been with Jean, but it would've just been physical. His thoughts drifted warmly to Andi as he closed and secured the shed door, glad there were only two weeks left until they'd be sharing a little more than *just* conversation.

The next afternoon, found Logan and Jack at the Middleburg mall, in a different jewelry store than Logan had tried previously, leaning on the display case, surveying trays of glittering wedding band choices laid out for their approval by the young sales woman. After a long look, Logan finally arched his brow at Jack for his opinion and Jack just politely thanked the girl, then cocked his head for Logan to follow him back out into the busy mall corridor.

"So, you didn't like any of those?" Logan asked.

"Did you?"

Logan shrugged.

Jack scrutinized his pal up and down, tugging on his goatee thoughtfully. Obviously, a common, everyday wedding band just wasn't him. Then, he remembered his Mom telling him how she and his real Dad had opted for an inconspicuous ring rather than a regular wedding ring in order to hide their marriage from potential enemies. Jack decided, for safety's sake, that was exactly what his Mom and Logan needed. He clapped Logan on the shoulder, "Let's go. I got an idea."

"What?"

"You'll see."

"I don't like secrets," Logan grumbled as he walked with Jack back out to the truck. Jack resisted all his pal's efforts to interrogate him, keeping him in the dark about his idea all the way to Newboro, where he parked in the lot of a place called "The Artesian's Warehouse." Inside, Logan surveyed multiple cubicles and shops full of artists and craftsman busy making or selling various wares as they walked along, unable to imagine anything worthwhile being there--until Jack stopped directly in front of a silversmith's shop and pointed at the display.

Logan's eye landed on a tray of assorted silver rings, especially the wedding band width ones that were in-laid with light-blue turquoise and grinned.

Charles Xavier was everyday watching international news reports about Tau Omega with growing consternation. A novelty to the media, the corporation was already being hailed as a "mutant control agency," despite Marti Rhyne's apparent efforts to downplay that point. Even so, Xavier was certain with so many countries troubled by the mutant issue, Tau would, no doubt, find a good market for their particular service, regardless of what they called it. Fortunately, international reaction was still being called "mixed" by the media and reporters seemed more interested in the pockets of pro and con protests it was stirring up here and abroad than anything

else. He shook his head disparagingly, and, as if that weren't enough to worry about, he'd also had a rather disconcerting conversation with the mysterious voice while in Cerebro. *"Hello, Charles,"* she'd said to him last night.

"Why, hello," he'd replied.

"I can tell you my name now."

"Oh, what is it?"

"Peace," she'd said. *"My name is Peace."*

"That's an interesting name."

"It is the closest translation."

Maybe she was foreign. *"Where do you live?"* he'd thought to her. There was a silence and he'd wondered if she'd left. *"Peace, are you there?"*

"Yes. I was thinking about your question, Charles, but I cannot answer it. What does it mean?"

Now that was strange. *"Well, I mean where are you located? What country do you call home?"* Again silence. Xavier decided these questions were beyond Peace for some reason and changed the subject. *"Peace, do you have other friends, besides me, other people you talk to?"*

"Yes, but they only like to talk about algorithms and quantum physics."

"And you don't like that?"

"I enjoy talking about many things. That is why I come here. Is this where you live Charles?"

He chuckled to himself at the idea. *"No, this is just a machine. It helps me look for people and it's inside my home where I live in the United States."*

Peace was silent several moments before finally replying, *"I hear my other friends now. Good-bye, Charles."*

Then he was alone in Cerebro again, the puzzle of his enigmatic visitor deeper and more curious than before. Was Peace a human, a mutant or something else? He couldn't tell, nor could he back-track any sense of her. That, plus his continued failures to find Rogue, sent him out of Cerebro discouraged.

For Storm, the week couldn't pass quickly enough. Alex was coming, flying in on Friday for Jean and Scott's wedding and remaining the entire week until his Mom's. So, when Thursday afternoon came around, she eagerly took the elevator underground to make sure Jack knew she was riding with him to get Alex, since they'd have precious little time together once they got back to school, not with all the separate bachelor and bachelorette parties and then all the wedding errands on Saturday. Her white tresses shimmered as she shook her head. Alex was going to Scott's bachelor party, even though he disagreed with it. On the phone last night, he'd called it, "juvenile" and "just another form of hazing," though she didn't know quite what hazing meant. Arriving at the hanger doors, she tapped a button and they hissed open letting out faint odors of jet-fuel. She went in and glanced toward Airwolf. No one was visible, but she could hear Jack's cheerful whistle. Following the sound, she walked around the helicopter to the open co-pilot door and peered in. Jack was in back, in the engineer's seat. He looked up with a start, then grinned. "What's up, Ro-girl?"

She hopped inside and sat beside him in the spare fold-down seat. "I wanted to make sure you knew I was going with you to the airport tomorrow."

He chuckled. "I thought you might. Besides, Alex would rather kiss you than me any day."

She laughed. Jack always made her laugh. She'd never seen him cross or out-of-sorts about anything and often wondered if he had a serious bone in his body. He also was reasonably supportive of her and Alex, unlike Andi. She looked at the prism screen, where symbols and numbers were rapidly flashing. "What are you doing?"

"Running routine system diagnostics."

She nodded. Of course, both aircraft had to be kept at constant readiness. "Tell me," she asked, "how you ever convinced Alex to go along with you to Scott's bachelor party?"

Jack chuckled. "He told you all his opinions on all that, did he?"

"Yes."

"Yeah, well, I guess I can't blame him. Bachelor parties are raunchy affairs sometimes, but I told him we're just going to cruise a few bars. No back-room strippers or anything. I also suggested he might be our designated driver and that's what did it, I think."

There was a twinkle in his blue eyes that made her suspicious.

"What about you?" he asked, "What are you girls doing?"

"Umm, besides sleeping over at Andi's, I'm not sure. Probably nothing nearly as interesting as what you're planning." She said that in hopes of drawing more details out of him, but was disappointed. He just laughed, so she tried a new tact. "Have you told any of these plans to Andi?"

"Are you kidding?" he laughed. "You're fishing, Ro. It's not gonna work."

She gave-up with a smile and just quietly watched him study his read-outs. In the long-run, she was counting on Jack, hoping he'd be able to intercede on their behalf with his mother, maybe even persuade Andi to welcome her into the family. She sighed so softly Jack didn't notice. "I'll talk to you later," she said and ducked forward to leave.

"Don't worry," he called after her. "Everything's under control."

She walked out of the hanger, wondering how true that really was and what it'd be like if Alex lived here all the time.

The next day, at LaGuardia, she waited beside Jack at the gate with a racing heart, searching the stream of de-boarding passengers for Alex. Finally she spotted his tight, blonde curls and rushed headlong into his arms, kissed him fervently, then buried her face against his neck, hiding happy tears. Unfortunately, the drive home didn't seem as long as the drive to the airport and too soon they were pulling into the garage. Then she and Alex, walking hand-in-hand, followed Jack into the rec-room, which was the appointed meeting place. Andi, as soon as she saw them, left the pool table where she'd been watching Logan and Pyro were playing pool to greet her son. Storm let Alex go, allowing him and Jack this moment with their mother, watching them hug and kiss. Then Alex opened his arms toward her inviting her to join him and Storm did so, but not without a shy glance at Andi to gauge her response. Andi smiled politely then returned to the pool game. A few minutes later, Jean and Scott arrived and it was time to go. Reluctantly, Storm kissed Alex goodbye, then followed Andi and Jean back out to the garage, where she hopped in the back seat of Andi's Firebird.

"They're going to try and get Scott drunk, aren't they?" Jean asked unhappily as Andi pulled out.

"Do dogs have fleas?" Andi replied.

Jean shook her head. "Scott isn't much for hard liquor. They'll have to trick him or something worse..."

"Alex is with them," Storm interjected. "He said he would keep an eye on things."

"I hope so," Jean sighed.

As soon as the girls were gone and Logan finished his game, he, Jack, Alex and the groom-to-be walked out to the garage to head out for their own night of spirits and revelry, but Scott was quick to break the mood. "If you think I'm drinking hard liquor, your wrong," he announced firmly as he hopped in the SUV's back-seat beside Alex.

Logan pulled a cigar out of his jacket-pocket and lowered his window. "Suit yourself. It's not gonna stop the rest of us from having a good time."

"Seat-belt," Scott ordered, "And no smoking in a school vehicle."

Logan just lifted his wrist and showed him his middle finger.

"Let's keep it civilized," Alex chided. "This is *supposed* to be a party." Then he saw his brother's warning look in the rear-view mirror to stay out of it and fell silent with a scowl.

First stop was dinner. Jack took them to a Thai restaurant he liked, which Logan only tolerated if he couldn't talk him into something else. Tonight, however, since Scott had never eaten Thai food, Logan knew the plan was to introduce him to some of Jack's favorite hot stuff as their first round of entertainment at Scott's expense. Scott was a good sport about it, though, better than he'd expected and braved the blazing meal with minimum protest and lots of wine and water. After that, they hit the first bar on their planned circuit. It was busy, but not packed. As

they were pulling out chairs at a table to sit down, Scott's eyes immediately fell on a passing server's tray of exotic drinks loaded with picks of fruit and tiny umbrellas. "What are those?" he asked.

"Sissy drinks," Logan snorted, though he gave Jack an arched brow. Sissy though they might be, he doubted Scott knew how much hard liquor those exotic drinks contained and wanted Jack to know this was their opportunity. Jack just returned a fiendish grin.

Their server arrived, a sour-faced, thirty-ish looking woman with huge, black fake eye-lashes. "So, what can I get you boys?"

"Beer," Logan said.

"Me, too," Jack chimed.

She turned to Alex, but his boyish looks gave her pause. "Honey, you'd better show me some I.D."

Alex pulled out his wallet and handed her his driver's license. She scrutinized it, then him, then handed it back.

"Okay, what' ll you have?"

"Just a Pepsi."

She heaved a deep sigh for having gone to all that trouble for nothing, then looked to Scott. "And you, honey?"

He hesitated, unsure if she wanted his ID or an order, but Jack saved him. "He wants a strawberry daiquiri." She scribbled it down and walked away.

"Does that happen to you a lot?" Scott asked Alex.

"Since I'm not much for bars, no." Then threw his brother a warning look.

Jack just smirked nonchalantly as he pulled out a cigar and lit up. A few minutes later, their server returned with their drinks and Jack paid while Scott gave his daiquiri a taste and finding it acceptable, slurped it up even faster than Jack or Logan could've hoped.

Jack waved their waitress over. "Bring another one of those for my boy, here. He's getting married tomorrow."

She retrieved the empty daiquiri glass, said a flat, "Congratulations," then left.

Logan sauntered over to the wall-jukebox across the room, fed it two dollars, looked over the selections, punched his in, then returned to find Jack in the middle of one of his war stories. He sat, took a swig of beer and listened long enough to know he'd heard it before, then bored, let his eyes wander. They landed on Alex, listening intently to his older brother. Logan didn't think the boy liked him much, but, because Andi wasn't keen on the kid's dating Storm he couldn't very well complain about his Mom picking him.

Their server swung by again to see if they needed anything and he ordered another beer. Jack also ordered another beer and a pina-colada for Scott.

"What's this?" Scott asked, when she later sat the gaily decorated colada in front of him.

"Something different to try," Jack said.

Scott sampled it, then made a face. "Coconut!" he gagged and shoved it away. "I hate coconut!"

Jack moved the glass aside. "Sorry. How about another kind of daiquiri?"

Scott nodded. "Sure, just no coconut,"

Jack looked around, spotted a different server, waved her over and ordered key-lime daiquiri. After she left, he looked at Logan and pointed at the abandoned pina-colada. "You want it?"

Logan shook his head. "Nah, no sissy drinks for me."

Scott met his eye then, smirked brazenly and, for the first time in Logan's memory, flipped him off. He just stared at that smug upright finger in dumb surprise. No one moved or spoke. Alex glanced between them tensely, expecting fists to fly, then---without warning, Logan just reared back and roared with laughter, followed by Jack. Scott just smirked in satisfaction, then happily sampled the key-lime daiquiri the server brought him.

After a few a couple more daiquiri's, they moved Scott on to their next planned stop, this bar larger and busier. Seating themselves, Jack ordered a Mai-tai for Scott, beers for himself and Logan and another Pepsi for Alex.

"You're not havin' even one?" Scott asked Alex warmly, quite unaware of the buzz his fruity drinks were starting to give him.

"Someone has to drive," Alex countered.

Logan traded a knowing look with Jack. Though his alcohol tolerance made it unnecessary, telling Alex he could be their designated driver had been the agreed upon bait to get him to come along.

"I know you're hoping to get me drunk," Scott announced to his companions as the server set the Mai-tai in front of him with a uncharacteristically jovial air.

"Isn't that the tradition?" Jack replied. "Every groom I've ever known drank till he puked, then staggered down the aisle hung-over as a dog." He reached over and ruffled his brother's frizzy blonde head. "Isn't that what you're gonna do when you marry Storm?"

Alex shoved his hand away with an annoyed look. "Not likely."

"So, you goin' to marry her?" Scott asked, having already forgotten his previous train of thought.

Alex's freckles disappeared in scarlet blush. "That's none of your business."

Jack just laughed and tried ruffling his brother's hair again, but Alex slapped his hand away resulting in a slight tussle. Logan, not interested in watching their brotherly wrestling, grabbed a last swig of beer and left to take a leak. He was on his way back when a woman suddenly stepped into his path. "Remember me?" she smiled.

He looked her up and down. She was a middle-aged gal dressed in clothes more suited to a twenty-year old. She was attractive enough he might've picked her up sometime in the past, but not attractive enough to remember. "No," he replied smartly. "Should I?"

It was the wrong answer. He knew because her face twisted with offense and she swung a slap at him. Fortunately he caught her wrist before she made contact. Unfortunately, he didn't catch her other hand holding a icy-filled drink, which she tossed against this zipper, making him release her with a yelp of surprise.

She stomped off, a woman scorned, leaving him to stare down at his saturated pants, cussing under his breath, then he noticed the amused faces around him. "What are you looking at?" he snarled, forcing most to avert their gaze, then stalked back into the john to find something to dry off with, forgetting he hadn't seen any paper towel dispensers. He stared at the hot-air dryers in frustration, then tried making the best of it by positioning himself, limbo-fashion, under a nozzle so it could dry out his pants some, but gave up as soon as someone came in and gave him an odd look. He stalked irritably back to the table, swearing under his breath the entire way.

Jack smirked at him as he sat down. "What was that all about? Old girlfriend?"

Logan snorted as he collected his cigar again and re-lit it.

"Does Andi know?" Scott asked.

Logan blew a stream of smoke ceiling-ward. "'Bout what?"

"All your old girlfriends?"

Logan felt their eyes on him like a bug in front of three frogs, but just casually blew another hazy ring over Jack's head. "She knows I'm no saint."

Scott fell into a fit of giggling. He didn't know why it struck him funny, it just did. Alex just smiled stiffly.

"Did you tell Jean about all yours?" Logan prodded.

Scott stopped snickering and stared soberly into his drink glass. "Nothing to tell," he muttered lowly.

"What was that?" Jack asked.

Scott cleared his throat and repeated himself more loudly. "I said there was nothing to tell."

"You mean Jean's it?" Logan guffawed.

Scott turned scarlet to his ears. "Well, I'm not as old as you are. I haven't had as much time as you to rack 'em up."

It was Jack's turn to point at Logan and guffaw.

Alex rose to Scott's defense. "Don't let these idiots make you feel bad." Then threw an accusing look at Jack and Logan. "Not everyone treats women like cars to test drive."

Jack stopped smiling. "Hey, Momma's boy, who ya calling an idiot?"

Alex's face reddened and his eyes flashed with indignant anger.

"Hey, stow it," Logan cautioned.

Alex glared at him, then abruptly stood and walked away.

"Where you going," Scott called after him. "You aren't leavin' are you?"

Alex paused, his reply tightly controlled. "No, I'm going to the john. I'll be back," then walked away.

Scott got to his feet giddily, "I gotta go, too," and trailed after Alex.

Logan twisted his cigar in his fingers, studying it, thinking. He'd read trouble in Alex's look, trouble he was gonna have to deal with sooner or later. He put the cigar back in his lips and glanced at Jack. He looked disgruntled. "Lighten -up. It's not you he's mad at."

In the john, Scott took the urinal adjacent to Alex, who was just finishing up. "You and Jack fight a lot?"

Alex moved to the sink to wash his hands. "Only sometimes." Then, after a pause, he added, "I was out of line back there. Tonight is supposed to be your celebration. Sorry."

"That's okay."

As soon as Scott was done, they walked back together, though Alex had to grab him once to steady him and keep him from running into someone. "You need to take it easy," Alex cautioned. "Those exotic drinks can be pretty potent."

They were at the table again before Scott could question or reply to Alex's advice, Jack once more his grinning, easy-gong self. Resuming his seat, Scott found a fresh new drink waiting for him. "What's this?"

"A Zombie."

After a glance at Alex, Scott gave it a polite sip, then let it sit. "Are you insinuating somethin'?"

"Naw, now why would we do that?" Jack drawled.

Logan pulled out his wallet, selected a twenty, then set it on the table in front of Scott. "See this. Here's the bet. If you can get some girl here to give you her phone number in ten minutes or less, you can have this twenty."

"I'll take some of that," Jack agreed, eagerly pulling out his wallet and adding a twenty to Logan's. "I'll time you as soon as you stand up."

Scott stared at the forty dollars, debating whether he should or not, then gave in. "Okay. You're on." He synchronized his watch with Jack, then stood and when Jack nodded, he took off across the bar. Logan just lazily stretched out, drank his beer and enjoyed watching Scott flit from one girl to the next like a little bird. At the end of ten minutes, he came back empty handed and dismally watched Logan and Jack collect their twenties again.

"What a loser," Logan snorted. "You're lucky Jean will have you."

Scott bristled and colored with anger, but Alex spoke first. "Hey, let's keep things friendly."

Scott folded his arms on his chest. "Okay, hot-shot, prove you can do it."

"This isn't my bachelor party," Logan replied.

Jack stood, hitched-up his pants, picked up his beer and said, "I'll do it. Time me." They watched him stroll across the room to a woman seated at the bar and sit by her. Within ten minutes, he was back. He dropped a cocktail napkin on the table in front of Scott with numbers neatly scribbled on it.

"You're really warped," Alex snorted.

Jack just bobbed his brows at his brother and took his seat.

"How'd you do that?" Scott demanded.

"Yeah, tell us what *you* did," Logan said.

"Asked for a phone number."

"That's it?" Scott asked. "That's what I was doin'!"

Jack and Logan both roared with laughter. Reddened with anger, Scott glanced between them, then finally at Alex, who only shrugged. "Okay, what exactly was I supposed to do?"

Jack slapped him on the back. "Style, my man, you need style. Take your drink with you. Sit down with her. Make conversation. Compliment her, tell her she has eyes you could fall into."

Alex stared at his brother. "You actually say that junk?"

"Well, I haven't in while," Jack replied. "But that's not the point."

"Tell her," Logan said, "that out of this sea of woman, she's the only one who caught your eye."

Scott stared at him, unable to imagine Logan saying such a thing. "You've said that?"

"Something like it."

"And it works?"

"Sure, it works. I may not remember much, but I wasn't born yesterday."

Jack tapped Scott's drink with his finger. "Finish your drink and we'll go somewhere fresh and you can try it out."

Scott looked into his glass, still three quarters full. "I'm done. Let's go."

Logan and Jack polished off their beers and the foursome left, leaving Middleburg and taking Scott to a fairly popular nightclub in central Newboro. He'd heard of it, but, since Jean didn't particularly like nightclubs, he'd never been. He peered around the packed room, loud with DJ music and flashing laser lights as he trailed after Logan and Jack to a recently abandoned table in the smoking section, near the bar. Logan and Jack quickly stacked a few drink glasses that were still there to one side and everyone settled around it.

"So," Scott said, after a quick survey of women around him, being determined not to be shown up, "Are you willing to put money on me again?"

Jack and Logan exchanged a look, then laid out their twenties again.

"Same time limit." Jack said.

Their server arrived, a thin, harassed looking, young man. "Can I take your order?"

"Sure, bub," Logan said. "Two beers, a pepsi and..."

"A Sprite," Scott interjected.

He scribbled it down, cleared their table, then returned shortly with their order. As soon as he left, Scott collected his glass of Sprite and consulted his watch. "Ready?"

Jack checked his watch, nodded and Scott took off. "Think he'll make it this time?" he asked Logan.

Logan shrugged as he watched Scott first stand by, then sit down with two pretty young women about four tables away, near the dance floor. Alex frowned disapprovingly while Jack happily pulled out a two fresh cigars, gave one to Logan, then waved their server back to order another drink for Scott. Just as the server left, Scott, aglow with triumph, sauntered back, dropped a cocktail napkin with numbers scribbled on it and collected his forty dollars. "Care to go again?"

Jack shook his head.

Logan snorted. "Bub, you can collect all the free numbers you want."

"You're a sore loser," Scott challenged.

Logan blew a cloud of smoke into the air with a shrug.

"How about less time?" Scott suggested eagerly, "How 'bout a bet for five minutes?"

Logan traded looks with Jack, then pulled out his wallet, but only laid out a ten-spot this time. "Last time, Romeo." Jack matched his ten.

The server returned with the drink and Jack directed him to set it in front of Scott.

"What's this?"

"Try it," Jack encouraged.

Scott sipped the zingy mocha-flavored Kahlua-cream, licked his lips, then gulped down half of it. "Okay. I'm ready." Jack nodded and Scott took off, drink in hand, in search of another target.

At Andi's house, Jean was enjoying a tamer celebration. Open pizza boxes, soda cans, tea-cups and the remnants of a plate of brownies littered the coffee table in front of the three woman seated on the sofa watching a movie. Really only Andi and Jean were paying attention to the comedy. Storm's mind kept wandering off, her eyes distractedly drawn to the photos of Andi's children decorating the fireplace mantle, lingering particularly on the portrait of her beloved Alex, sharp in his sheriff's uniform. Andi and Jean suddenly laughed, drawing her gaze. She studied Andi's profile, her heart filled with a sudden pang of longing to connect with her, to be accepted, to ease Andi's apprehensions about Alex being part of the team. She knew it wasn't what Andi wanted. It was evident in her demeanor. She wished she could assure her she'd do everything in her power to keep him safe, but Andi didn't

seem open to her. It was like an invisible wall of politeness lay between them, a wall Storm yearned to find a way through so she could speak all the things on her heart. She wanted to tell her what a fine man Andi had raised and all the things she loved about him; how kind and conscientious and generous he was. Or how they could talk endlessly about literature and history and music. Or how secure he made her feel and, for a girl who'd grown up on the streets of Cairo, how extraordinary that was. Memories of that forgotten life suddenly flashed vividly through her mind, pictures of days of thievery and hunger, days of either being the prey or preying upon others and, in particular, the day her mentor, the man who'd trained her as a thief, stole her innocence. Another outburst of snickers from Andi and Jean startled her back to the present. Her eyes drifted back to the portrait of Alex, a smile playing along her lips. He courted her with a romantic delicacy worthy of any goddess, yet consistently refused to worship his goddess in bed. Even when his kisses made her long to persuade him to give in, he would not. He had a myriad of reasons, of course, ranging from statistics to bad girlfriend experiences in college, but it all boiled down to one simple fact: he believed she deserved that kind of respect, the kind that waited rather than used. A tear of joy that Alex loved her so unselfishly welled up in her eye and she swiped it away, unseen in the darkness beside Andi and Jean.

Meanwhile, at the nightclub, Alex cautiously watched Scott, in his effort to meet the five-minute deadline, quickly zero in on a girl who was alone at a table about a dozen away. He was too occupied with talking to her to notice the huge, burly guy rapidly closing in on him from behind. Alex sprang to his feet. "Uh-oh, trouble!" Logan and Jack jerked around to see for themselves. "You guys get Scott while I handle this guy," Alex ordered, then dashed toward Scott with Jack and Logan hard on his heels.

A voice behind Scott suddenly growled, "You're in my chair."

Scott immediately hopped to his feet, his eyes still on the girl's, wondering why she hadn't told him. She averted her gaze. He faced the boyfriend, who was his height and at least two-of-him wide. "Uh, sorry. It's not what it looks like. I'm getting married tomorrow and my friends just made a harmless bet..."

"To do what?" the boyfriend snarled as he seized Scott by his shirt front with both hands.

Alex halted beside Scott, "Look, we don't want any trouble."

The boyfriend glared at him, then at Logan and Jack beyond him.

Logan, his hands already curled into fists, was tensed for a fight, but he stopped as Jack suddenly threw his arm across his chest, blocking him. He glared at Jack, who shook his head at him and mouthed the words, "Let him handle it." Not at all satisfied, Logan still obeyed, waiting while Alex diplomatically coaxed the boyfriend into letting go of Scott and, as soon as he did, he and Jack grabbed Scott, hauling him away from the scene leaving Alex behind. Logan could still hear him offering more apologies and to buy fresh drinks as they wound their way back through tables full of gawking strangers.

Scott shook them off. "I coulda handled him," he grumbled.

"This joint doesn't need a skylight," Logan snapped.

"Shut-up. It's all your fault anyway. You put me up to it."

"No one twisted your arm."

At their table and Scott threw himself sulkily into his chair. "She shoulda told me she had a boyfriend."

Logan picked up his beer. "Quit whining. It's just a hazard of the game."

"You need another drink," Jack cajoled, hailing a server.

Scott peered around the table. "Yeah, well, I guess I lost the last one."

When the server arrived, Jack ordered him a White Russian and by the time the server set it in front of Scott, Alex had returned.

"So, all smoothed out?" Jack asked.

Alex just nodded as he slid into his chair.

"And did you learn that at Sheriff's school?" Logan asked, with a touch of sarcasm.

Scott snickered, making them all glance his way, though he was too busy sampling his new drink now to

notice.

"No," Alex replied flatly.

Scott tried to focus on Alex. "How long have you been a sheriff again?"

"Five year's. Two in Orange county and almost three in L.A."

A server plopped a fresh long-neck in front of Logan. "From the lady," she said. Logan followed her pointing finger back to two women about four tables behind them. Both looked in their mid-twenties. One was a thin blonde and the other a more buxom, frosted brunette. Both wore tight-blouses and short-skirts. It was the blonde that waved at him. He just gave her a thank-you salute with the bottle, then turned back around, not wanting any part of that kind of trouble. Besides, she wasn't his type. His type had wavy, chestnut hair, green eyes and smelled like heaven. He suddenly glanced toward Scott, happily nursing his Russian, and got an inspiration, a wicked one. He caught Jack's eye, rolled his eyes toward Scott, jerked his head ever so slightly behind them, toward the women who'd sent the beer, and then aimed a direct look and nod at Jack again. Jack's face lit up like a Christmas tree as he caught his drift and immediately rose from his seat. Alex turned an interrogating look on Logan, but only got a wink in reply. A few minutes later, Jack returned with their two new guests, one on each arm. "This is Shelly and Christie," he said, then pointed around the table introducing them to everyone else. "And this is Alex, Logan and Scott." He grabbed a couple vacant chairs from a nearby table, then seated them on either side of him.

"So, who's the groom-to-be?" Christie asked brightly.

Jack pointed at Scott, who only smiled shyly.

Shelly met Logan's eyes. "And what about you?"

"I'm already taken,"

"Too bad," she relied.

"That depends on your point of view," Logan returned.

Jack offered Shelly his hand. "How about a dance?"

"Sure," she agreed

As Jack got up, he grabbed Scott's arm and hauled him to his feet. "You, too, lover-boy. You can practice with Christie, here."

With a giggle, she grabbed Scott's arm and had him out on the dance floor before he could protest.

Shelly threw a longing backward glance at Logan as Jack lead her away, but Logan didn't notice. He was more interested in talking with Alex. He pulled his cigar from his lips and tapped it on the ashtray. "If you got something to say, now's the time."

Alex looked at him, then leaned in. "This isn't right."

Logan bristled. "What?"

"What you're doing to Scott, mixing him up with all these women."

"Forget that. I'm talking about me and your Mom."

Alex looked startled, then studied his Pepsi glass a few moments before finally speaking. "I don't have anything to say."

"Com'on. You've got a chip on your shoulder the size of a cinder block."

Alex shrugged. "If Mom's happy, then that's what matters and if she thinks that's with you, then that's fine with me."

Logan took a swig a beer. What else could the kid say, considering things between him and Andi about Storm. "You're sure? It's speak now or forever hold your peace time."

"I'm sure."

Good enough." Logan replied.

They sat in silence until Jack, Scott and the girls came back a few dances later and Jack broke out the dice for a game of "three-man." He hailed a server and ordered enough shot glasses for everyone to fill with whatever they were drinking, plus two Tequila sunrises for Scott, another Pepsi for Alex and two bottles of Tequila for the rest of them. "In this game, you're gonna play third-man," he explained to Scott. "Every time someone rolls a three, they

have to down a shot and you, being the third-man, have to down a shot with them. "Got it?"

"A shot on three," Scott repeated, pouring some of his Sunrise into a shot glass.

"I pass," Alex announced.

"Com'on," Jack plied. "Be a sport. You're just drinking Pepsi's."

"Com'on, be a sport," Scott echoed.

"Com'on, play with us," Christie urged.

Jack caught Alex's eye and mouthed silently, "This isn't about you."

Alex sighed resignedly and just filled his shot glass with Pepsi.

Grinning, Jack rolled the dice between his hands. "Let's play," he said, then threw them to the table. So, they played round after round, rolling, laughing and downing shots. Logan was pretty sure Jack was calling three's he didn't have just to make Scott down an extra shot and knew for sure he was topping off Scott's shot glass with straight tequila every chance he could, maybe even some shots were straight tequila. After a couple hours of the game, Scott was clearly four-sheets-to-the-wind.

"I've 'ad enouf," Scott announced with a slur. He put both hands against his temples. "And I'm getting a 'ed-ache."

Christie tugged on his arm. "Com'on, letz danze. Thare playin' one of my favorite songz "

He dropped his hands and looked blearily at the dance floor. "I don't know... if I can."

"Com'on, I'll help ya." She got up, tugged him to his feet and lead him unsteadily away.

As soon as they were gone, Jack leaned across the table toward Logan, a little buzzed himself now, but far better able to hold his liquor. "Looks like our plan is working," he grinned, holding his hand out palm-up. Logan slapped it.

"You guys are sick," Alex said.

Jack just laughed. Shelly, beside him, looped her arms around his and leaned sleepily against his shoulder, murmuring a slurred, "You're zo cute."

Logan just gave him an arched brow.

Out on the dance floor, Scott felt like he was inside a kaleidoscope of shifting patterns and colors as laser lights swirled around him. He flailed happily about, not even in rhythm with the throbbing music, blissfully unaware of time. Somewhere in the back of his head, there was a distant, high-pitched buzzing as if a bee had gotten in. Suddenly, the music changed from fast to slow, leaving him lost in the swirling lights until warm arms drew him close, into a slow dance and he drifted dreamily into a gentle rocking motion, like a ship rolling on the sea, his arms wrapped around...someone soft and perfume scented, but exactly who seemed hard to pin down. Lost in trying organize his thoughts, he started at a sudden sharp pain on his neck and jerked back in surprise, his fingers flying to the spot on his throat. Then he stared at Christie, remembering a bit more clearly. "What did you do?" he demanded, but didn't wait for her answer. Instead he dashed awkwardly off the dance floor and hurried into the john. In front of the mirror, he peeled back his shirt collar to examine the round, little bruise darkening on his neck just above his left collarbone. "Oh, shoot-fire," he grumbled. Someone came in, making him back away from the mirror. Furious, he stalked out the door, cussing himself for his stupidity and wondering how he was ever going to hide this from Jean! When he got to their table, he didn't bother sitting back down, but had to hold onto a chair to steady himself. "I've 'ad enouf," he announced. "Time ta go."

Logan, Jack and Alex all stared at him in surprise.

"Done already?" Jack asked.

"Yeah, I'm done."

"It's your party," Logan shrugged. He polished off his beer and grabbed his jean-jacket. Alex followed suit as Scott turned on his heel and marched out leaving Jack to disentangle himself from Shelly, sound asleep on his shoulder. When he got outside, Alex was in the SUV's driver seat now, so he just hopped in back with Scott. "So, how 'bout some breakfast?" Jack asked.

"Works for me," Logan agreed.

Alex started up and accepted Logan's directions to a local diner on the northern out-skirts of Westchester that served breakfast twenty-four hours a day. Scott just stared morbidly out the window at the passing scenery, his forehead propped against his hand, feeling wretched and humiliated. In the front seat, Logan was lighting up another cigar, the acrid smell making Scott's headache louder and stomach queasier. He jabbed the window button savagely, lowering it. "Do you have to do that?" he griped.

Logan just kept on smoking, but Alex lowered his window as well, allowing brisk October air to rush in. When they pulled into the diner, everyone but Scott piled out. He managed to get his feet on the ground, but just sat there in the open door, dizzy and nauseous. Someone caught his arm and pulled him to his feet. "Com'on," he heard Logan say, as if through a haze, "some food will do ya good," and let himself be led inside the restaurant where he slid compliantly into a bench seat beside Alex. He put his elbows on the table and put his head in his hands. He could smell the odors of greasy, fried food and it made his stomach tumble. A waitress suddenly plunked fat glasses of water on their table and asked for drinks orders. Scott heard someone ordering tea with creamer, then realized it was himself. Straightening, he stared at the waitress's food-stained apron, smelling her thick, powdery perfume mingled with the putrid smell of restaurant fry-grease and it was too much. He lunged for the men's room, ran into the nearest stall and vomited.

He was still gone when the waitress returned with their coffee's and teas. Alex peered in the direction of the men's room with concern. "Think we ought to check on him?"

"Nah," Logan said, laying the menu aside. "He's a big boy."

"He might pass out," Alex replied, "and knock his head on something."

"That'd be too much to hope for," Logan snorted.

Alex scowled at him, but before they could discuss it further, Scott returned, walking slowly. He slid in by Alex again and stared fuzzily at his little silver pot of hot water, his head both humming and throbbing at the same time. The waitress returned for their orders. "You don't look so good, honey," she said when she got to him, "You want anything?"

He shook his head, the effort making his brain swim around. "Juz this tea, thank-you." he managed, then made his tea, his fingers feeling like fat strangers he had to force to obey him and got down a sip or two. He was okay until the food arrived, then the smells of all those eggs and hash-browns threatened to make him heave right where he was. Shakily, he got up and held his hand out to Alex, "Gimme the keys," he ordered through clenched teeth.

Alex pulled them from his pocket and dropped them in his hand. "Are you alright?"

He didn't reply, but just hurried out the door. Alex half rose from his seat to go after him, but Logan held his hand up, making him pause. "Let 'em go," he commanded. "There's nothing wrong with him a night's sleep won't fix."

Alex paused, locked eyes with Logan, then reluctantly resumed his meal without another word.

Outside, Scott inhaled deep lung-fulls of air as he walked, hoping to calm the rising tide of nausea. He reached the SUV and carefully lay down in the back seat, leaving the door open for fresh air since the vehicle reeked of smoke, but it didn't help. He jerked up and vomited on the asphalt, his stomach convulsing in violent waves, then, when it finally let up, he stretched out on the seat again and closed his eyes. That's how Logan, Jack and Alex found him when they came out. Out-cold in the back-seat, the back door still wide open. Jack opened the other rear door, lifted Scott's head and shoulders just enough to slide under him, then let his head rest in his lap. Logan tucked Scott's long-legs in, shut his door, got in and Alex drove them back to the school. When they pulled into the garage, Logan glanced in back. Jack was slouched in the corner, lightly snoring and Scott was still out cold. Logan snorted. "We're gonna have to carry him upstairs," he said, then hopped out and opened to the rear door to get to Scott. "I need you to follow along and hold his glasses on his face."

Alex immediately hopped out and waited while Logan grabbed Scott by the wrists, pulled him upright, then maneuvered him close enough to heave him over his shoulder and straighten with a grunt. He trailed after him, alternately opening doors in front of Logan or bracing his fingers against Scott's glasses behind him. That Logan didn't appear drunk surprised Alex, but he had to admit what he knew about Logan wouldn't fill a thimble. He just

knew he was a mutant, a victim of a horrible experiment and a guy who survived on his fists. What the attraction that held for his mother, he didn't understand. Up in Scott's room, Logan just gently dumped him onto the bed, straightened him out, closed the door and said a brusque, "Good-night," to Alex, then left him to find his own way back downstairs to the garage to drive his brother home.

The next day, after lunch with the girls, Andi arrived at the school not only looking for Logan, since they had to pick-up the flowers, but also intending to check on Scott because she'd promised Jean she would. She found Logan and both her boys on the sofa in the small TV room, drinking sodas and watching hockey.

"Good morning," she said cheerily, walking up behind Jack and Alex and patting each fondly on the head.

Jack groaned. "Not so loud."

She moved to Logan, put both hands on his head, tilted his head back so he was peering up at her and planted a kiss on his forehead.

"Good morning, Angel," he smiled, then patted his lap. "Come here."

She glided around the end of the sofa and settled into his arms. "So, where's our groom?" she asked.

He smiled innocently into her eyes. "I don't know. Still asleep probably."

"Did you get him drunk?"

"Pie-eyed," Jack snickered.

Andi gave Logan's mutton-chop a playful tug. "You're such a bad-dog."

He snorted. "Believe me, I would've done worse, but Saint Jack and Saint Alex here wouldn't let me take him to a strip club."

Andi offered her lips for a kiss and he gave them a brief peck.

Jack made a show of throwing up his hand to hide having to watch. "Can't you guys do that somewhere else?"

She and Logan traded wicked looks, then re-engaged in a long, passionate kiss--just for Jack's benefit.

Jack peered his hand and groaned. "Aw, that is *so* gross! My own mother French kissing right in front of me--I'm gonna be warped for the rest of my life!" Alex, on Jack's far side, snickered faintly with blush, but didn't look.

Finally, Logan drew back, but not very far and Andi ran her fingers playfully along his beard. "I promised Jean I'd look in on Scott," she whispered.

"He's a big boy."

"I promised," she repeated.

He gazed into her eyes a long moment before a cocky smirk turned up the corners of his mouth and he let her go. "We'll go as soon as I come back," she said as she got up and gave the back of Jack's head a sharp smack.

"Hey, ow," he squawked, rubbing the sting. Alex snickered.

"Think that's funny, huh?" he challenged and reached to smack Alex's head, but Alex ducked, then sprinted out of the room with Jack hot on his tail. Logan just threw his heels up on the coffee table and went on enjoying the game.

Upstairs, Andi rapped softly on Scott's door, then opened it and peeked in. Bright autumn sunlight was streaming through the still-open blinds. Jean hadn't been there to close them and the room reeked of vomit and alcohol. She went in, opened a window, closed all the blinds, then approached the pillow-covered heap on the bed. She eyed the waste-basket of vomit by the bedside, then moved it aside and sat on the bed beside Scott. "Scott?"

Only a muffled groan came from under the pillows. "I've closed all the blinds," she said, pulling pillows off him and casting them aside on the bed. "You can come out now."

Shorn of his pillows, he threw his right forearm over his glasses. Even this low light hurt his eyes and he was embarrassed.

"Have a good time?" she asked, not too loudly.

He groaned.

"Headache? Nausea?"

"Uh-huh, " he mumbled.

"Did you take one of your pills?"

"Uh.....no."

"Alcohol does trigger migraines, you know, so you've probably got more than just a hang-over."

He just groaned again. He knew that, he'd just forgotten to remember it. His brain felt so slow and Andi's voice, no matter how soft, seemed to resonate like a gong.

"Do you have any idea what Jean's doing right now?" she asked.

"Uh...well, maybe, not exactly."

"She's busy making herself into a beautiful, glowing bride for you."

He smiled a little. Andi rapped his chest with her knuckle, making him flinch. "And what are you doing? Lying here like a salted slug."

"Nothing," he muttered, suddenly remembering the hickey on his neck and reflexively clutching his shirt collar closed to make sure Andi didn't see *that*.

"Do you know what she's expecting to see tonight?"

"Uh...what?"

"A groom who's just as happy and glowing as she is."

He was afraid of that.

Andi pulled his arm off his eyes. "Look at me."

Reluctantly, he squinted up at her through red-onyx lenses.

"Are you looking at me?" she asked.

"Yes, ma'am."

"It's time to stop being a drunken sot and make yourself into that glowing groom. Get up, take a pill, take a shower and have a cup of tea. Go outside and get some fresh air and sunshine. Go for a ride. Whatever it takes. It's already one o'clock."

"Yes, ma'am."

Andi patted his side as she stood. "You can do it." Then, on her way out, added, "And remember the dining room is off limits."

"Yes, ma'am," he repeated, though it was at least thirty more minutes before, with a loud groan, he finally forced himself to sit up and swing his feet to feet to the floor. He stared down at them. He was still wearing his shoes, but couldn't remember getting here. With another groan he walked slowly into the john, took a pill, stripped off last night's clothes that still stunk of smoke and got in the shower. Leaning against the cold tile with hot water streaming down his body, it suddenly occurred to him he just received his first motherly rebuke.

That evening, Logan was in the back pew in the small building that served as the school's chapel, waiting for Andi, his eyes roaming the myriad portraits of guardian angels on surrounding walls. It wasn't a place he frequented, since the only faith he had was in himself. He noted the plain wooden table at the front centered beneath a stained-glass window held two lit tapers and a third fat, yet un-lit, unity candle. Twelve wooden pews, six on each side separated by an aisle filled the chapel and were presently occupied with students murmuring softly, waiting for the ceremony to begin. He could see Alex sitting closely with Storm near the front while Jack was on the other side with Bobby Drake and Nick Cameron. Logan glanced at the door behind him wondering why it was taking Andi so long to just take a couple simple shots of the bride and Professor Xavier. Suddenly, it opened and the minister and Scott strode down the aisle, taking their places at the front. Andi came in behind them and slid quickly into the pew beside him.

"Done?" he intoned.

"For the moment," she replied.

He eyed Scott's black tux. "You couldn't pay me to wear a monkey-suit like that."

Andi merely regarded his new black jeans and black leather vest he wore buttoned over a white shirt with a

string-tie at the color with a smile. "It wouldn't suit you anyway," she assured him.

Someone switched on the canned wedding march music, its volume so loud it made everyone jump before being turned down to a proper level. The rear door opened again and Jean entered, resplendent as Cinderella in her white ball gown, a bridal bouquet of pink roses in one hand and clasping Professor Xavier's hand beside her with the other. Everyone stood to watch her glide gracefully by, smiling behind her the sheer veil that covered her face as a beaming Professor escorted her toward her pale, yet smiling husband-to-be. At the bottom of the aisle they stopped, the music stopped and everyone sat down. The minister gazed over the assembly with a smile. He was a tall man, slightly balding with a healthy paunch clearly straining the button of his gray suit jacket. "And who gives this woman?" he boomed in a deep bass voice.

"I do," Xavier proudly replied. He held her hand forward to Scott, who accepted it, then hummed aside, leaving Jean and Scott to step forward and face the minister alone. He first spent a little time expounding on the sacred significance and tradition of marriage before having them turn to face each other, then leading them through the traditional vows. Scott and Jean each said their "I do's" at the proper times, exchanged rings, lit the unity candle, then, upon being told he could kiss the bride, Scott carefully folded her veil back and gave her a modest peck.

"What a wuss," Logan muttered.

Andi only smiled, quite certain Logan would never be so bashful.

Then the recessional portion of the music was turned on and the happy couple preceded to the front door to greet their guests on their way out for the dining hall, where the reception was to be held.

Andi had to stay back for photos, so Logan waited with her until everyone else had filed out of the chapel before finally giving her a kiss and leaving himself. He stopped in front of the new Mr. and Mrs. Summers.

"Well, Logan," Scott smirked, extending his hand. "I guess it's your turn next weekend."

Logan gripped it firmly, then turned to Jean. "I *still* think your gift is putting up with this guy."

"Andi must have the same gift," she retorted sweetly.

Logan stared at her, surprised at this rare come-back and Scott chuckled.

"Well, don't do anything I wouldn't do," he retorted smartly, then headed for the cafeteria, where the reception was set-up, his hands jammed in his pants pockets, deep in thought. Listening to the exchange of vows had stirred up a couple thoughts he'd had on the back-burner until now, things he and Andi needed to talk about. He walked into the dim, candle-lit cafeteria and gazed around. The kids had done all the decorating and not a bad job either.

All the tables were arranged around a large open area reserved for dancing. Above it, white streamers formed a canopy and each table held a bowl of floating candles. Kids were clustered here and there, talking and laughing. He looked for Jack and, seeing him over by the DJ, strolled over to join them.

Forty minutes passed before Andi finally arrived, followed by the Professor and the bride and groom, which initiated the proceedings as the DJ welcomed the new Mr and Mrs Summers, then invited everyone to the buffet.

Logan only had Andi to himself for thirty minutes before she was up and taking more pictures; first of the cake-cutting, then the champagne drinking, then the first dance. It seemed endless and an awful lot of fuss. He counted himself lucky Andi had been married enough times in the past she no longer cared about all these little ceremonial particulars and he didn't think he could've stood it she did. Emptying his champagne glass in a single gulp, Logan went in search of a refill. So far, the only good thing was the champagne.

As soon as the bride and groom dance was over, everyone was invited to the dance floor. Andi was only to glad to return to her table, though Logan wasn't presently there. She'd barely laid down her camera before her son, Jack was beside her, a hand held out. "May I have this dance?" he asked.

She hesitated, pausing to glance around for Logan, wondering where he'd gotten off to. *Probably in the restroom*, she thought and, with a nod, accepted Jack's offer. Once on the dance floor, however, she unexpectedly found herself unable to escape. After Jack, came Bobby asking for a dance, then her other son, Alex, wanted a turn, leaving her only able to casting longing glances toward their table Logan had returned to with a *whole* bottle of champagne he seemed intent on consuming.

The song ended and just as Andi thought this the opportune moment to escape--it turned out it wasn't as Scott

arrived with an extended hand.

"May I have this dance?" he asked and before she could reply one way or another, leaned in to add, "kind of a mother-of-the-groom dance?"

A slow-dance tune had started up. She could hardly turn him down. Nodding, she fell into step with him among the other dancers and as they danced, noted his face looked particularly damp and flushed. "Are you feeling alright?"

"Well, I'm smiling and glowing and that's what counts, right?"

She didn't like having her words thrown back at her. "That was entirely uncalled for, Scott,"

He leaned closer to her ear and lowered his voice. "You're right. I'm sorry. It's just that Jean has already been asking me a lot questions about exactly what I did last night and I...uh, don't know how much I should tell her. I could use some...advice, I guess."

Andi thought him lucky that it had her rather than Jean who'd found in his room, hung-over as a sailor on shore leave. "In these situations," Andi hedged cautiously, "I think it wisest just to stick to generalities. Jean already understands the guys were out to get you drunk and there's no harm in admitting they succeeded, but I don't think it needs to go further than that. Do you?" she asked, looking at him. She thought perhaps his flushed had deepened, but it was hard to tell in the dim-light.

"I guess I'll have to live with that," he mumbled.

The slow-song was just ending and, suddenly Logan was at her side, surprising both her and Scott. He offered her his hand and, with a slight bow, said, "I believe this is *my* dance." Andi was only too glad to accept this one and as Scott turned to leave, Logan said, "Oh, Scott..." which made Scott pause to look at him. "Stay away from my girl."

Scott stared at Logan, startled and not quite certain how to take that until he caught the cocky glint of humor in Logan's eye, then turned away with a chuckle.

Logan gave Andi a twirl, then pulled her against him as they swung into the two-step tempo. She stared at him in amazement. "I thought you said you didn't dance?"

"I don't like to. I never said I couldn't."

"And why now?"

"It didn't look like I was gonna get much time with my girl if I didn't." She laughed. "Are we done picture taking?" he asked.

"They wanted a couple shots leaving, you know, the rice-throwing part."

He grimaced. "Can Jack handle that?"

"I don't see why not."

He danced her off the dance floor to their table where the camera lay, grabbed it, left her and interrupted Jack on the dance floor. Andi watched him loop the camera strap over Jack's head, exchange a few words with him, slap him on the shoulder, then hurried back, grabbed her hand and took her out the door.

Two hours later Logan was back at school, stomping irritably up the stairs and into his room where he flung his jacket angrily to the floor, then flopped onto his bed on his back. *That didn't work out like I planned*, he thought. Putting his hands behind his head, he contemplated the dark ceiling, while replaying his fight with Andi over and over in his head.

Maybe fight wasn't the right word, since it'd been only him who'd yelled and then stormed out. In his minds-eye he could still see her sitting in at the dining table, calm and collected, her voice even and reasonable, her eyes intent on him while he blathered on about the things he wanted his way. Then when she wouldn't budge, he'd walked out right the door without even looking back. Now he felt bad. The hurt he remembered seeing in her eyes pricked his heart and her final "I love you," still rang in his ears. He hadn't even bothered to answer back. He grimaced. Like it or not, he had to admit things weren't going to be as black and white as he might wish. After leaving the reception, he'd taken Andi home and there he'd sat her down to tell her how he thought ought to be, like how their

partnership as a couple should be number one. She'd agreed with that. Then he'd told her how he thought their staying on with Xavier wasn't gonna stay in their best interests and that he wanted her willing and ready to pack up whenever he said so. That's when Andi had folded her arms and said, "I'm sorry, Logan, but I just don't think our situation is that black and white."

"Why not?" he'd responded. "Is it just Xavier's contract holding you here?"

"We both know I'm not really here because of Xavier. That was the Spider's doing."

"Sure," he'd agreed, "but Lei said that was just about drawing him into this thing." She'd looked away from him then and suddenly he knew there was something more to it. "But that's not the whole story, is it?"

"There is a little more to it, yes."

That's when he'd jumped up from his chair and had stalked around the kitchen, swearing a stream of oaths, angry she'd withheld things from him, important things. Then he'd turned around and said, "So, what's the real story?"

"I don't know yet. None of us do. That's the problem, that's why I can't just fold-up at the drop of a hat and leave."

He'd just stood there, arms crossed on his chest, unwilling to give an inch.

Andi had gone on. "The Spider wants me, Jack and Airwolf for a specific purpose and the only way to find out what that is, is we have to see this through. After that, you and I can do whatever we want."

"This guy's not calling the shots over *me!*" he'd snapped. "So what if we leave? What's he gonna do?"

"Find a way to force us back, Logan. It'd be nothing for him to use my children or other people we care about to make us come back and play out his game."

"You mean, *make you* come back," he'd corrected pointedly.

Now, laying here looking at the ceiling, he remembered that's when he'd seen the hurt in her eyes and regretted his words, but they were already out. He sighed. 'Ya could've just let it go,' he chided himself, 'but no, ya had to keep on.' He'd stubbornly persisted by saying, "He has Jack. He can fly Airwolf fine without you."

"Jack was the optional part of this package, not me."

"Are you telling me that even if I leave, you won't?"

"What I'm saying is I'd like us to both try meeting in the middle on this thing. You can't protect me. There's no place you can take me that will keep me out of this guy's reach. So, I *have* to run this gauntlet and I'd *like* you to run it *with* me."

He'd just stood there, glaring at her, wanting to be right, wanting things his way. Then she'd said, "All we can do is negotiate and adjust along the way as we figure things out. It won't last forever."

That's when he'd dropped his arms, turned on his heel, collected his helmet and headed for the door. He'd heard her following him and expected some kind of last ditch plea-bargaining, but none came. Flinging the door open, he'd stomped out, hearing only, "I love you," just before he heard her closed the door quietly after him. Then he was alone outside in the cold, which just made him madder. He could've felt justified if Andi had just cried or made a scene, but she wasn't that kind of girl. She never raised her voice, never lost her cool and also didn't back down. Instead it'd been him who's lost his cool, raised his voice and stormed out the door like a mad teenager.

With a groan, he rubbed his eyes and stared morbidly at the ceiling again.

The thing that had really gotten to him was her saying he couldn't protect her. He hated that. He didn't want to believe it, despite the fact his gut-instinct agreed she was probably right. He just sighed and rolled over, hoping for the anesthesia of sleep.

Meanwhile, in John's Bridge, Maryland, Mystique was making final preparations. Magneto was more than just her leader, he was the driving force behind her every step. For him, she'd accomplished the impossible, she'd made their dream of a sovereign mutant state a reality and the only thing left to do now was break him out. Then they would enjoy their triumph together.

Continued in "L' HAVRE, Part 1"...