

A MATTER OF CONSCIENCE by D.G. Davis {Rated PG}

Synopsis: A Dream Challenge: In his sleep, Logan finds himself facing...himself--in a most unusual way.

{All names, locations or businesses are either products of imagination or are being used fictitiously and any resemblance to persons living or dead is coincidental. All copy-righted characters belong to Marvel/20CenturyFox. Story refers to a moment early in Logan's romantic relationship with original character, Dr. Susan Harris, who is prominent in all stories by DG Davis.}

Ten hours straight, my butt glued to the saddle of my bike, numb don't begin to describe the sensation. Don't know why; almost wish I hadn't, but I managed to avoid three major crack-ups. Any one of them might've been the one to push my healing factor to the limit. When bad luck's what I want, I can't even get that to come my way. Ran a couple radar traps. Good thing, too, cuz with the mood I'm festering, any cop stupid enough to catch up to me might've ended up a statistic; a very bloody, busted up statistic.

Haven't figured out where I'm going. North. North West. It's where I gravitate when it's time to move on. Ya'd think I might try a change of scenery and go south where it's warm, laid back, easy. But nah, it's like there's a magnet pulling me on to cold, harsh and dangerous.

Gotta stop soon. Gas tank's below E; running on fumes. I split without much dough in my wallet, just enough to fill the tank. Definitely not enough for a flea bag motel and probably not enough for something to eat. Ain't in the mood to pander for an odd job and I don't know these parts well enough to find a sleazy joint where I might hustle a game or fight. Guess it's gonna be a long night.

"Ssstrryyykerrr!" *Snickt!* *Snackt!*

I'm awake; disoriented, drenched in sweat, heart's fit to bust out of my chest, feel sick...again. Reflexively, I start to dry wash my face, but halt mid-motion. No joy to accidentally slice myself open, even if I do heal in no time. The familiar, dull ache between my knuckles fades like the familiar searing nightmare.

Damn! Shredded the survival blanket. Could be worse, like spearing my own legs or something. Standing, I stretch, pop my joints and groan. There's a heavy, urgent feeling centered in my groin and an unlucky tree a couple yards from my campsite gets a shower.

Can't make up my mind whether to hit the road or try for another hour or two of sleep. Feral instincts attuned to the temperature, dew-fall, calm; the particular scent of an emerging new day tells me the time better than any watch. Think I'll sit a spell longer. Catch the sunrise.

Lonely and beautiful, a whip-poor-will's lullaby relaxes my mind. There's a rustling and the faintest squeak. I sniff and pick up the scent of a mouse scampering through the pine needle forest floor. Above an owl flexes its majestic wings, no doubt ready to make breakfast of the mouse. Crickets set up a soothing chorus. I try counting the chirps. Supposed to be able to calculate the actual temperature by how many cricket chirps a minute. Don't have a thermometer to prove it but bet I'm close enough. Nature's a tranquilizing tonic and soon I feel sleep tugging at the edges of my mind. Half-aware, I feel my head bob as my chin settles on my chest.

"Freakin' coward! Wake yer bum up!"

Wham! Fireworks explode inside my skull as something solid collides with my head. I roll and spring to my feet, claws deployed and aimed. *What the...?* Ain't nothing there! Sniffing, there's nothing but the heady scent of the forest, a whisper of rain on its way and the faint essence of a distant skunk.

"Clueless retard! Wanna smell me, check out yer pits."

Bang! Something pounds my kidneys, forcing me to my knees. "Grrraahhrrr!" I slash wide with my claws. "What are ya? Invisible 'r somethin'?" I feel a wisp of wind brush past my face.

"Close, but no *cee-gar*," the voice torments.

"Who's the freakin' coward?" I bellow. "Show y'self."

Smash! Something jabs me sharp under the chin driving my teeth into my tongue. "Gah!" My howl echoes

through the trees. Expecting blood, I spit, but there ain't any! "What are you?"

"Take a wild guess, excrement for brains."

"Huh?" I duck, expecting another wallop. This ain't real. Gotta be a nightmare. Hallucination maybe? Must've picked the wrong wild mushrooms for that rabbit stew I cooked up for supper.

"You wish, bub," it says landing a potent jab to my gut that sends me sprawling on my butt, gasping like an asthmatic. I feel a presence, like something standing over me. Thrusting my claws upward, they contact nothing, but thin air.

"Get a clue doofus! You can't slice and dice your own conscience."

Thin air swirls. Picking up dirt, moss, dead leaves, a form congeals before my eyes until I'm staring at-- *myself*. Shape shifter? Nah, even the best trail a scent. Nothing computes the way it oughta and that always equals a whole lotta bad.

"Grrraarrhh!" Claws extended, I spring, aiming to split my doppelganger in half. Takes a microsecond to realize he's a copycat, too. Braced for a world of hurt, I'm stunned to find myself sprawled flat on my stomach, spitting dirt. I went right through him, like a ghost.

Roaring, "Enough o' this crap ya pig headed bugger," he breaks into millions of vividly hued geometric shapes and, reforming like a pixilated movie character, he becomes *she*. Tall and sexy with flowing red hair, piercing emerald eyes and that voice; smooth and cool as satin sheets, "Maybe you'll listen to *me*."

"Whoa! Jean?"

"No."

"This ain't real. I'm dreaming."

"Yes and yes." Her tone's as mocking as her grin.

"Huh?"

"I told you, Logan. I'm your conscience."

Now I know I'm dealing with some kind of weird mutant. "Can't be, darlin', cuz I ain't got one; least ways, none that'd look as good as you."

"I can look like whomever you want," she says, transforming into a hulk of stringy, smelly, tawny gold fur. Growling, "How 'bout this, Runt?" Sabretooth is poised for a smack down. Itching to oblige, I jab for his gut with the hardware.

Whoa! *Snackt* back goes the claws as I'm staring into ethereal doe eyes, one obscured by a strand of silver-white hair. Hands resting on her hips, chin set in a stubborn line, this sassy little girl-woman lips, "Ah kin look like this, but ya wouldn't pay me no mind."

Whassis? Mystique in my tent, act two? Fingers laced together, I stretch out my arms and crack my knuckles, "Got that right."

"Would you listen to me, Bright Eyes?" The voice is thin and broken, matching the bleak expression dulling Susie's usually vibrant face.

Damn! Low blow. Effective, too. Clenching my eyes does bugger all to block the image of Susie cowering in abject terror.

Pinching the bridge of my nose, I feel a throbbing settle in the middle of my brain. Goes good with the acid corroding my gut. "Whadaya want?"

"I'm here to talk sense into you." It's Jeannie again, moving toward me like a sidewinder pursues a rat, "But time is limited, so let's get down to business, shall we?"

"What? Ya turn into a pumpkin at midnight 'r sumthin'?"

"Not exactly, but if your sleep pattern changes; **pfft**, bye-bye dream-land."

"Makes about as much sense as everything else." Somebody gimme back the old nightmares. Least they're predictable. "Ok, Jeannie 'r conscience 'r whatever; whatcha ya doin' in my dreams?"

"I'm trying to save you from making the biggest mistake of your life."

Retrieving the backside I laugh off, I deadpan, "Don't need savin', darlin'."

Hands on those curvy hips, she rolls her eyes and sighs, "When are you going to quit letting dead men control you?"

I grab her by the shoulders, "Nobody controls me!" only to end up clutching air.

She leans against a tree grinning like she ain't got a care in the world, "You can't lie to yourself, you know."

"Go to hell."

"After you," she curtsies, then continues the inquisition. "So, what are you doing out in the middle of nowhere, existing like a vagabond and tearing yourself to pieces?"

Don't wanna go where she's leading. Aiming to stall, I rummage through my saddlebag looking for a smoke. Shame my flask is empty. Comfortable perched on a log, "Sweetheart," I explain between draws on the cigar, "we're talking normal state of affairs for the Wolverine."

"Looks to me like somebody's yanking your chain and you're doing exactly what you always do."

"And what's that?"

"Cut and run."

"Bug off, whatever ya are." I blow a couple of smoke rings for the heck of it.

"If you run again, then Stryker wins."

"What do you know?"

"I'm you, so I know everything you know. Difference is, I'm going to let you off the hook."

I want to pound the sympathetic look off her face as she glides the short distance between us. "You've come so far; begun to build a good life . . ." I flinch as she lays a soft hand on my shoulder, "Formed connections...attachments."

"And look where that got me." I swat her hand away, "No thanks, darlin'. The little domestic experiment was doomed from the start."

"You do defeatist better than anyone I know, Logan."

"Had lots o'practice."

"Fine," she snaps and stands over me. "Save your pity party for another one of your inner-selves."

"You done yet?" This time it ain't a smoke ring, but a cloud of it in her face.

"Almost."

"And I bet ya ain't gonna shut up 'til ya've said yer piece."

"Of course not and you know why? Because you've got it in you to get through this and get it right."

I growl and stomp the cigar stub into the ground, "What part don't ya get? I lost control. I almost killed her." I'm on fire, gesturing like a nutcase.

Dream-Jeannie doesn't bat an eye. "*But* you didn't."

I wanna puke just thinking about it. Primed and ready to smash Susie to a bloody pulp, if it weren't for...

"Does the reason really matter?" chops off my thoughts.

"Dunno. Might not've pulled back."

"No, you wouldn't have punched her. The wall, maybe."

Head bowed, staring at my worn boots, I ain't so sure and hate myself for it.

She's all compassion with, "Like I said before, I'll let you off the hook."

"Sure ya will. Listen up, Red. You and your dispensations can go straight to..."

Her arms raised to the sky, she cuts me off, "For heaven's sake Logan! There you go again!" Then, suddenly, she's in my face, her fist emphasizing each word with sharp jabs to my chest, "Okay, I'll set the hook. Better yet, let's go for gut and filet." Face twisted with withering contempt, she spits, "What about the *baby*?"

The question packs the wallop of sledgehammer and jumps my exasperation-factor. *Hell, if I know.* "Maybe she'll get lucky and lose it." I gasp, squeeze my eyes closed and dip my chin to my chest, wishing against hope to take back what I said.

"It's your dream."

Takes me a minute to figure out what she's saying, but tossing a life-line or not, I rip sarcastically, "Just click

my heels together three times, eh?”

The enigmatic smile on her face says plenty.

Feeling more like the worm on a fish hook, I squirm for an out, “Her getting knocked-up... never should’ve happened, ya know.”

“That’s a bit beside the point now, isn’t it?”

“Pretty much.” I laugh bitterly, “It’s stupid. She was on the pill ‘r somethin’.”

Her casual shrug makes me feel like fool. Can’t trust nobody or anything.

A disgusted sneer twists her lips, “Right. There’s your rock to hide under.”

“Ain’t hidin’ under any rock, darlin’.”

“B.S.”

“Whatever, Red. You may not be done, but I am. Shove off, will ya.”

“Sure, Logan. Whatever you want. But before I go, here’s a challenge for you.”

“Stubborn witch, ain’t ya?”

“Of course, I’m your conscience, remember?”

“Still think you’re a bad mushroom ‘r something.”

Her lips curl into an amused smirk.

I fidget, cock my head and crack my neck. Finally, with all the enthusiasm of a man facing the gallows, I expel a breath, “What’s the challenge?”

“Figure out your heart and your head...” she replies, gently pressing against my chest and feathering my temples with cool fingers. Then, cupping my chin, her expression turns absolute and cold, “And do the right thing.”

I jerk away grumbling, “And what’s the right thing?”

“Depends.” She shifts mood gears again, placatory this time, “Whatever it is, make it your choice. If it’s leave, have the guts to admit to her you can’t make things work. If it’s stay, then get back there and work it out.”

Dry washing my face, I’m thinking there ain’t a chance in the world fixing things. “She’s gonna tell me to hit the road.”

“Maybe. Maybe not. You too much of a coward to find out?”

I scuff the ground with my boot, heave a deep breath and gaze into the sunrise breaking orange between the trees, “Yeah.”

“Honest answer; that’s good. How about another honest answer?”

“What’s the question?”

“Answer this and you’ll know what you have to do.”

Jean’s body - or image - wavers, fragmenting into splotches of shimmering colors as her voice becomes a ghostly echo, “Do you... love her?” Then, *poof*, she was gone.

My eyeballs pop open. Springing to my feet, arms outstretched, I yowl like a crazy man, “Yes! I love her!”

The End