

Female Troubles, Part 2 by DG Davis {Rated PG}

Synopsis: *Even more soup hits the fan as Logan tries to figure out the mystery behind his daughter's origins!*

[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 X-men characters belong to Marvel/20 Century Fox. Original character, Dr. Susan Harris, is again featured.]

ALBERTA, CANADA, SEVERAL DAYS LATER

Feeling beat up, I lean my head back. "Alright! Shall we get outta here?"

"I suppose." Sue hauls herself off the couch with a weary groan. "Logan, it's getting late. I think I've really over done it today."

Intent on action, I'm not hearing her. "Got the airlines number programmed into your cell?"

"Yes. Any chance we might leave first thing tomorrow?"

Grabbing the cell from her purse on the nearby table, I scroll for the number. "Darlin', I won't stay here tonight." I can't. Can't handle one more nasty flashback. Can't handle my whacko mother. Pile on one more thing and the Wolverine's takin' control.

"How about a hotel then?"

Punching the keypad to automated prompts, I ain't listening to her. Getting to the selection I need, I'm greeted by a message that I don't wanna hear. I explode with a ripe barrage and almost trash her phone.

She sounds exasperated, "What's wrong now?"

"All flights are cancelled from Brunswick, Maine to Charlotte, North Carolina. Frikkin'snowstorm's got the east coast shut down."

"Lovely. What now?"

"Guess hotel's it."

"Guess it is. Gimme a hand, Bright Eyes."

She does sound exhausted. Her scent's tinged with it. "You know," she says stuffing clothes into her rolling case, "if the storm's that severe, it may be a few days before we can actually get back. Have you thought of that?"

Yeah, I thought about it. "Whoa! Wait a sec. Just might get us outta here after all." Grabbing her cell and punching numbers, I hear a crisp 'good-evening' even before the ring tone.

"One might accuse you of developing psychic powers, Logan."

"Whatcha doin', Charles? Sittin' on the durn thing?"

"Logan!" Susie whispers, "You're *not*!"

Askin' Charles? Ya betcha sweet buns I am. Nodding, I shush her with a look.

"Hah!" Charles quips. "Not quite. Coincidentally however, I had just rung *you*." Abruptly, his tone lowers, "I fear we have a situation developing."

A situation?

Timing's not the greatest, but I could use an approved outlet to vent. Crack a few skulls, shish-kebob a few villains all in the name of savin' the planet! Yeah, baby!

"What's up?"

Susie casts a quick, curious glance at me.

Charles warns, "It's rather delicate."

Spit it out, Chuck. "Ok."

"A few hours ago I received a rather mysterious call from Doctor Jennings asking for you."

For me! What the...? "And?"

"Of course, I informed her you weren't available and inquired if I might be of assistance."

"Will ya get to the point!" I grumble.

Susie's studying me real close now.

Charles replies, "She declined, but asked that I have you contact her immediately."

"Didn't say what she wanted?" Probably wants to know my whereabouts to slap that restraining order on my butt. Sue me for child support? That'd be rich.

"She! Who's *she*?" Susie says quietly.

Don't need an ex-scrumpy complicating things between Sue 'n me, so I shake my head and turn away. Ah, I feel the love stabbin' me right between the shoulders.

“No,” Charles answers. “Though something seemed amiss, therefore I took the liberty to track her with Cerebro.”

“Charles, what the hell ya gettin’ at?”

“Details are sketchy at the moment, Logan. Did you know Doctor Jennings is able to block telepaths?”

“Uh, not something I remember, but I’ll take your word for it.”

“Perusing what I could, I believe they’re in significant danger and felt compelled to send a team to extract them. For obvious reasons, I prefer not to divulge the location.”

“Just what kind o’ danger we talkin’ ‘bout?”

Got Susie’s attention again.

“The kind of danger that follows Stanislaw Ruchinsky and Company.”

“You’re kiddin’ me!”

Butting in, “Logan, what’s going on?” Sue ain’t quiet now.

“Ahem!” Charles responds. “Kindly brief Susan fully when we’re through.”

“No problem.” Like I’ll stand any chance of not? “Ya want us back?”

“Not for the time being. Once I understand the full nature of things, I’ll contact you and Scott. Kindly activate your com-unit and have him do likewise.”

“Roger that, Charles.”

“By the way Logan, what were *you* calling about?”

I snort, “Was gonna ask if Storm could fly in and pick Susie and me up.”

“Ah, I see.”

“Yeah. Well, it’s a moot point now. If somethin’s brewing, it ain’t right using the Blackbird for personal business.”

“Logan, if there’s a need, personal or otherwise, I’ll be glad to arrange something as soon as I know what we’re dealing with.”

“Nah! From what I hear, the weather’s bad. No point in riskin’ anything. I’ll handle it.”

“As you wish. I’ll be in touch.”

Susie jumps me with both feet, “*What* was that all about?”

“Don’t know yet.”

“Don’t gimme that, James Andrew! From the look on your face alone, it’s serious.”

“Maybe.”

“Dammit, Logan! You said someone’s in danger? Tell me what’s going on.”

“Darlin’, Charles is sending the Blackbird to extract two mutants from some kind o’ trouble. That’s all I got right now.”

“Right. And?”

“That’s it.”

Can see the wheels turning in her mind and she’s got a sour look on her face to match. “You said *she*. Oh! No frikkin’ way---*she*’s Marla and Wendy.”

“Yeah.”

“Marla and Wendy are in some sort of danger? Does Charles think it might be related to the kidnapping attempt?”

“Dunno. Charles didn’t say. All he’s got are impressions from Cerebro.”

“Must be some impressions to send an extraction team in the weather they’re having back home.”

“You can say that. Susie, listen to me. As soon as Charles knows more, he’s going to contact us. Best thing for right now is to finish packin’ up and head on out.”

“Don’t you think we should stay put? It’ll be a lot more time consuming to rendezvous with everybody scattered.”

I hate it when she’s right, but we still ain’t staying here tonight. Guess we’ll stay in closer proximity ‘til I hear from the boss. “Trust me, babe. It’ll be ok.”

xXx

A vibration in my pants pocket jets me off the couch. Muttering a curse, I realize I fell asleep. It’s daylight. There’s the vibration again: my com-unit. “Yo!”

“Logan.” No mistaking Charles’ precise diction, “Forgive the early hour.”

Whiskey soaked, my voice is coarse. “No problem. Whadaya got?”

“Is something amiss?”

Coughing to clear my pipes, “Nah! Long night, long story.”

“Hmm!”

“Don’t sweat it, ok.”

“Very well. I’ll get to the point. Doctor Jennings and her daughter are safe and sound.”

“Ok. What’s the story?”

“It appears that the Replications Division of Weapon X is active and possibly thriving.”

His disclosure hits like a grenade. Bye-bye buzz. “What’s that got to do with them?”

“Far more than I can go into under these circumstances.”

“Come on, Charles!” Perturbed, I pace. “Why’d ya call, if ya ain’t got nothing to say.”

He’s resolute, “There’s plenty to say, but Doctor Jennings has requested she speak with you directly.”

“Not good enough,” I bark.

After lengthy pause, he sounds conciliatory, “Very well. Simply put, without breaking trust with Doctor Jennings...”

“Screw her!” Rage seeps into my voice and I slam an open palm into a door frame. “If it’s got anything t’do with Weapon X...”

His tone’s calm in purposeful counter response to mine. “Logan, hear me out! It seems Ruchinsky approached her while on holiday informing her that it is time to assimilate Wendy into what she described as the *Company*.”

“Aw, crap!” So Ruchinsky’s a recruiter now! They must be slippin’ cuz, in my day, there’d be no chance of a potential asset getting past. Past me, anyway. “Charles, this doesn’t jive. They’re not this sloppy.”

“Indeed. I’ve considered the possibility of a trap. Scanning Doctor Jennings mind, if there is a trap, she’s not part of it. Howev...”

Fiddling with a window drape I cut in, “Don’t under estimate ‘em.”

“I don’t. However, I’ve not dismissed the possibility she may be an unwitting participant.”

“Lemme get this straight, you got her and the kid safe and sound *on campus*?”

“Of course...”

Gesturing with both hands, the phone cradled between jaw and shoulder, “Are you frikkin’ nuts!” I rant.

“...with full security protocols activated.”

“No ya don’t.” My lips curl into a humorless smirk, “Your number one and number two boys ain’t there.”

“Other Team members are thoroughly cross-trained. You supervised that yourself.”

“If Weapon Plus, or whatever they call ‘emselves now, are after either one, they ain’t gonna be easy to stop.” No sneer plays on my face now; just dead-eyed seriousness.

“What are you saying, Logan?”

I won’t veil the knife edge criticism from my voice. “I’m saying, you’re putting the entire school at *excessive* risk.”

“Providing shelter to at-risk mutants is what we do. Would you have me turn them away?”

“No.”

“I didn’t think so.”

Short of knocking him upside it, there’s no changing bare-head’s mind. “Alright, what’s the deal with Marla wantin’ to talk to me directly?”

“Precisely that.”

Pulling the phone from my ear, I stare incredulously, return it to my ear and grumble, “So you ain’t sayin’?”

“Correct.”

“Charles, answer this.” Flopping down on the couch, my voice projects apprehension. “Does Wendy know I’m her father?”

“As of this moment she hasn’t been told and I can safely say that’s part of what her mother wishes to discuss.” There’s no condescension in his paternalistic tone.

Sighing with frustration and fatigue, “You ain’t given me squat more information than when ya first called, ya know that?”

“I’m sorry, Logan. The issues are extremely complicated and delicate. By the way, the jet is free. Do you still wish to return?”

“Yeah, but unless it’s crucial, I’m stuck.”

“How so?”

“Susie’s havin’ a little problem and...um, well she’s in the hospital.”

“Good Heavens! The twins?”

“No. Cyst on her ovary. Everything’s under control, but I think she’s gonna need a day or two before her doc’ll let her do anything. Least that’s the impression I’m under.”

“Understood. Concentrate on your wife. We’ll manage.”

“Thanks. Later.”

xXx

Gotta stretch out the kinks. “Graarrgrrhhh!” Bobbling my neck right, then left, adamantium vertebrae sound like an amplified bowl of crispy rice cereal. Hell’s fire! The Company’s got their sights on Wendy. What’s that about?

Picking out a volume from the bookshelf, I thumb absently through it. Doing the math here, a lot don’t add up, but there’s a key element I can’t remember to save my butt and a not so niggling sense of I better figure it out -- *fast*. With no Danger Room handy, my preferred method of working it through is severely curbed. But recalling an indoor pool and spacious surrounding deck, I think I’ve got the ticket.

Padding through the silent house, I make my way to the rear wing and discover it’s still there, though it seems modernized since I last saw it. Yanking off my boots and stripping down to jeans only, I’m ready for a little civilized stress de-escalation.

Ramrod straight, I stand. Deep breath in through my nose...slow exhale between lightly pursed lips...close my eyes. I chant silently. “Clear my mind, bring forth peace, focus inner strength, seek perfection.” My mind shifts seamlessly to Japanese. Bowing deeply, as customary, “*Yoi*,” echoes off the glass enclosure.

Lunging so the right leg’s straight behind, left leg’s bent at the knee, my right arm projects forward parallel with my knee while the left arm angles back, bent at the elbow. In a fluid motion hips rotate, right leg trades with left for stance and my left fist rams forward. Taking a controlled breath, I pivot one hundred and eighty degrees and mirror the lunge, leg and arm maneuvers.

So it goes: lunging, spinning, punching and kicking my way through progressions of physically and mentally challenging sequences. The sting of perspiration in my eyes and the taste of it on my upper lip attests as much to my zeal for perfection as it does to the humidity in the pool house.

Exhaling past clenched teeth, completing the final move, I shout, “*Yame!*” and assume the same posture I began with.

More than halfway thru a second kata, my body’s loose and into the groove. Shame my mind’s not with the program. In combat or competition, this kind of inattention could cost me, but since this ain’t either, might as well go with the flow. The flow in this instance is an unrelenting replay of Susie collapsing in my arms. Let it go, bub! She’s fine. Ya know she is. The doc told ya. She told ya. Ya smelled it. That’s certain, whatever it is.

“*E-itt!*” A roundhouse kick morphs into an air born spiral. Landing in a perfect lunge helps to banish unsettling images, but visualizing the crushed larynx of my latest emotional demon gratifies like nothing else.

Bigger! Now this poor excuse for a mind I’ve got’s taking me back to Stryker’s lab. Why?

I can see five of us sitting in a nondescript, chilly lounge in nothing, but our skivvies. I lose my rhythm picturing fat-head Creed sitting there in drawers emblazoned with: The Real Home of the Whopper®. Where’s the Beef’s more like it.

Who’s on my left? Kane! With enhanced prosthetics, he was more machine than man. Sparring, he turned me into butcher scraps a couple times.

David 'Maverick' North, sits to my right, thumbing through the swimsuit issue of a sports rag sheet. He’s one of a half handful of men I genuinely respected and considered a true friend. Heckuva a pool shark, too.

Who’s the last one? Oh, yeah, that big mouth, Deadpool. What was his real name? Forgot. Never liked or trusted the poser.

Hello! In she walks. Dr. Marla Jennings. Statuesque with curves no lab coat could conceal. Tendrils of cocoa brown hair disobey the controlling clasp of the gold barrette she wears. She’s balancing a stack of specimen cups, “Ok...er, gentlemen, here’s the deal,” she says casting a stern eye at us under-shortened degenerates.

Can’t recall her exact words, but I sure remember our reactions. First, dead silence. Creed’s the first to spout off, “Yo, Princess, ain’t no way that puny thing’s gonna hold all *my* juice.”

“Flea-bag, we’re talking quality, not quantity,” Kane provokes. “Guess yer out o’ the game.”

Creed snarls, “Bite me!”

“Hey, doll,” Deadpool adds, “no friggin’ way I’m fillin’ a cup for nobody -- not even Luc Devil-face hisself.”

“Yo, ‘Pool!” Kane bristles, “Where ya get off talkin’ to the lady like that?”

“What ya gonna do Scrap-borg?”

Grinning wickedly, Kane raises his prosthetic arm, projects and snaps out a mean looking set of pinchers.

Maverick looks up from his magazine and snickers. “Tough having just a nub to work with, wouldn’t you say, old man?”

Marla sets the cups on a table. “*Boys!*” she emphasizes. “Sort yourselves out without too much carnage.” Beating a quick retreat, she shouts over her shoulder, “You’ll find appropriate magazines in the stalls should you have any difficulty.”

Just as it’s my turn, opportunity knocks. Sidling up intimately, I take her hand, “Darlin’,” suggestively kissing each finger. “Thought I ranked a little more up close and personal. How about you and me...go next door and discuss my sample in private?”

“Ooff!” Didn’t expect an elbow in my solar plexus or her flippant, “Think again, *bub!*”

In the present, my voice echoes “Haaa-aaahh!” in the pool house in a vain effort to refocus on my kata. Images of the past and Charles’ words repeat nonstop in my cranium: Replications, cloning, genetic engineering, blood, semen, bone marrow, Wendy, Ruchinsky, assimilation.

The kid’s an emerging telepath and telekinetic, a strong one at that. Didn’t Susie say she seems to have a healing factor? More recently, that little chat Marla and I had at the ballet reverberates between my ears:

“*Lemme ask you this: what are you gonna tell her when she does ask?*”

“*The truth.*”

“*And what’s the truth?*”

“*You simply provided a share of the biological material needed to bring her to life.*”

I gasp out loud as a million volt revelation explodes in my brain and my head pounds to a frenzied, adrenalin juiced heartbeat. Pistoning fists pound out pieces of a puzzle that interlock forming an abominable prospect: Wendy *ain’t* just adopted!

I bellow, redoubling kicks and punches. No images of shattered sternums or pulverized faces can exorcise the repugnant thought. I feel sick to my stomach. She’s a...

Images of Diebel, Stryker and Ruchinsky explode in my face before vanishing in sulphuric haze.

She’s been *created* -- engineered, using me and who knows who else!

Rage escalating, my vision goes scarlet, muscles burn as the claws eject. “Grrraahhrrrggghh!” Clawed fists crash down, pelting my face with shards of cement. An elegantly molded bench lays split to rubble.

Sinking to the deck in lotus form, the grisly insight marinates my core with toxic effluent. It’ll be over my bloated, maggot infested corpse, I vow inwardly, before they’ll ever get to her!

xXx

We’re snuggled under the covers in the guest suite at what Logan refers to as the Howlett house of horrors. I’m restless.

“Oh gosh! This hasn’t got anything to do with your mother and all, but did Charles ever call back about the mess with Wendy?”

He groans and mutters a curse. Stretching his arms over his head, he’s silent.

Darn him and the silent treatment, “Well?”

“Well, what?”

“It’s deep, but that’s another story,” I joke hoping to finagle his mood. I can’t really fault him. With me having the cyst, we didn’t get away. He’s done a fantastic job keeping control under awful circumstances. Even so, I’m going to hafta cajole the details out piece meal, “Did Charles call?”

“Yep.”

“Is everything ok?”

“Far as I can tell.”

“Oh, come on! What happened? Did someone try to snatch Wendy again?”

“Again?”

“Yeah. That’s what the police report chalked it up to.”

“Thought you said sexual assault?”

“That was secondary, if I remember right.”

“Damn! I need to see the report when we get back.”

“Doubtful, Logan. She’s a minor and it’ll be sealed.”

He sighs.

“Hey, Stinker, you never really answered my question.”

“Which one was that?”

“Grrrr!” I smack him with a pillow and enunciate every syllable, “Was...there...an-o-ther...ab-duc-tion...at-tempt...made?”

“Ok, ok!” He yanks the pillow away and scrunches it to his chest. “Have mercy, woman.” His fingers dig into the pillow as he exhales, “I’m still tryin’ to get my head around this.”

“What? Don’t tell me. Her mother? What’s *that* woman want?”

He dips his head and snorts. That gesture in itself speaks volumes.

Quick, somebody take my blood pressure. I’ve got no issues with Wendy, she’s a sweetheart. If her budding mutations come to fruition as Charles’ testing indicates, Xavier’s school is going to be the best place for her. Her mother, on the other hand, I don’t like. Nor do I trust her and I don’t want her anywhere near my husband.

Who am I kidding? Wendy Jennings enrolls and...and I thought Allen’s wife and their little princesses were a thorn in my side. At least *they* live across town.

Logan sits up, drops the pillow, scrubs his face with his palms and levels, “Somebody from Weapon X wants the kid.”

Hold your horses, cowboy! That’s not what I expect him to say. “What did you say?”

“You heard me.”

“That’s not funny, Logan.”

“Ain’t joking.”

Crud bunnies! He isn’t. “I thought whatever remained of Weapon X is at the bottom of Alkali Lake.”

“Only one division. Marla was involved with Replications...”

I interrupt, “What the dickens is that?”

“Genetic research.”

“Right. That’s her Ph.D. Genetics. Is it Replications that’s interested in Wendy?”

“Sounds like it.”

“Why’d she call Charles?”

“She didn’t. She called me. But since we weren’t there...”

“And Charles thought it serious enough.”

“Yep.”

“Why would...Good Heavens!” Crossing myself, I conjure up a mess of ugly possibilities.

With a deathly serious expression, he assents, “Uh-huh.”

“What are we going to do?”

“*We* are gonna to do nothing. When we get back, *I’m* gonna have a little chat with her and figure out just what’s going on.”

“Logan, what if she’s neck deep with them? She could lead them right to our doorstep!”

“Yeah, she could, but Charles didn’t sense it.”

“He’s not infallible. What’s your gut tell you?”

He stares past me and shakes his head, “Dunno know, darlin’.”

Every instinct screams to me he’s not telling the whole story, but he pulls me close. “Can’t do squat about it right now. Let’s get some sleep.”

I sigh, frustrated over yet another batch of complications stirred into the mix. He’s right about one thing. We **can’t** do squat right now.

“Love you, Bright Eyes.”

He returns the pillow, plumping it for me, “Love ya, too.” He smooches my cheek, switches off the light and nestles into the downy mattress. Tangling his fingers in mine, he shields his eyes with his right arm and conks out in minutes.

xXx

Standing out here on the terrace by Sue’s office, it feels good to breathe fresh air ‘cuz four days breathing recycled med-lab air is four days too long. It’s been snowing. In the twilight, the grounds seem peaceful draped in a thick, luminescent blanket of the stuff.

The explosion scrubbed a lot of details from my memory, but Susie’s caught me up on all the latest and done a great job

keeping a huge thorn outta my backside: namely Marla Jennings.

Speakin' of, she's at it again. Through the glass door, I hear her badgering Susie.

"How's Logan doing?"

"Recovering."

"Good. It's imperative I speak to him."

"Yes, you made that clear, um, the other night. It's going to be a while longer."

"How much longer?"

"He was basically blown up, so how the heck should I know? And even if I did, get this: we have a few priorities to deal with before we deal with you."

Yee-haw, I can smell the pheromones through the glass doors. Serious cat fight brewing.

"I don't think it's your place to set priorities when it comes to *our* daughter."

"Oh, whoa! Back up, Marla. Two weeks ago, Logan was nothing more than...what did you say? He only supplied the *biological material*? So don't you dare pull that *our* daughter crap."

They crank up the volume and for a second I debate refereeing.

"Circumstances change."

"They certainly do."

"I beg your pardon." I watch Marla crane her neck like a swan with a fish stuck in its throat. "What's that supposed to mean?"

"You reap what you sow." Sue's gesturing now, emphasizing each word with a finger jab in the air. "And I don't appreciate you dragging Logan into something he isn't responsible for."

Marla puffs up like a hen in a chicken coop. "You have no idea what you're talking about."

"That's a false assumption."

"Maybe so, but I don't think it makes any difference."

"I think it's false assumptions that got you in this mess in the first place."

"How dare you!"

Beet red, I hope Marla doesn't blow a blood vessel or something. Er, maybe I do.

"It's been two days. I know he's back on his feet. I want to see him and I want to see him *now*."

"I don't make up his schedule."

"You're both avoiding me."

"Think whatever you like, Marla."

Ok, she's hit the limit. Marla leans both arms on Sue's desk and gets in her face. "Where is he?"

"Enough!" I growl and step through the door. "Turn around."

Flinching like I goosed her with a branding iron, she faces me square on. "It's about ti...oh, my goodness! Logan, you look like death warmed over."

Look in the mirror lately? "Whadaya want?"

She glances sourly at Susie. "We need to speak privately."

I set her straight. "Nope."

"Fine," she huffs.

"You know what?" Sue interjects, "I think this whole thing'll go a lot better if I'm not sitting here."

That's not what I expect. "Ya sure?"

"Yes. Unless you need me to stay."

"Up to you."

"I'll be in the conservatory." She pecks my cheek on the way out.

"Ok, Marla. Now what?"

"I need your help."

"Uh-huh. Got that much when I talked to Charles. Take a load off your feet and tell me the whole story."

She spills her guts about Ruchinsky. I can tell she ain't lying, but she's leaving out a heckuva lot.

I ain't tipping my hand on what I remember, so we're playing connect the dots, "Why's Ruchinsky want her?"

"I don't know."

"Bull! Listen up, Marla. Gimme the truth. All of it or I walk."

"I told you they want to train her for heaven knows what."

"I'll tell ya what, but I shouldn't hafta. You were up to your neck with 'em same as me."

"No. Never like you."

"It's all relative. But think about it. Replications was originally set up to create clones. Super soldier clones. So, you telling me you don't know what Ruchinsky wants is telling me you're stupid."

"No need to be insulting."

"I just call 'em as I see 'em."

"It doesn't make sense. She's a little girl."

"It sure does. Just look at what the kid's got already and she's just begun to manifest her power. And for being a little girl, have ya taken a good look at her, Marla?" Ignoring her fall-off-a-cliff-and-die expression, I press on, "There are places where they train 'em young as nine or ten to be killers."

"I know." She chokes back a sob and it ain't croc tears.

"That's why I came to you, Logan. You're the only one I know who stands any chance of protecting our daughter from that fate."

Aw, geez! Don't go all watery on me. Tossing the tissue box on Sue's desk in her direction, it's time to redirect the conversation. "Alright, explain how she's my kid and don't gimme the sperm donor routine."

"That's the truth."

"I want the rest of the truth."

"What do you know about in-vitro fertilization?"

"Test tube babies, right?"

"Correct. Simply put that's what Wendy is a product of."

"So how did you wind up adopting her?"

"She's not adopted. I gave birth to her."

My stomach hits the floor. "So you *are* her mother?"

"Not biologically. I was a surrogate."

"Then who is?"

"I told you I don't know and that's the truth."

"Did you know I was her father from the beginning?"

"Yes."

"And you don't know who her mother is? C'mon, Marla, that's friggin' BS."

"Logan, kindly curb that crude mouth of yours. There were hundreds of ova banked, but there were only five sperm donors."

"Creed, North, Kane, me and..."

"Wade Wilson. You do know about it!"

"Dunno nothing about any donor stuff. I do remember givin' up a lot of samples as part of whatever testing and research Diebel ordered."

Five of us banking samples and how many eggs? My mind blanks. "You're saying there's hundreds of..."

"No. The program's success was extremely limited."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"A majority of embryos weren't up to standard and were destroyed. Some of us volunteered for multiple implantations, but that failed far too often as well. Alternative forms of gestation yielded no positive results. Ruchinsky told me himself that he knew of only about a half dozen successes, Wendy being one."

"You're telling me I got six kids like Wendy out there?"

She rolls her eyes and chortles, "Your ego's as big as your anatomy. I'm saying between *all* the male donors there were roughly six documented successes."

Uh-huh. There's a comfort. Psychotic mini-Creeds and Deadpools running loose. "That doesn't answer the question."

"I only have firsthand knowledge of Wendy."

Damn the woman and her hedging, "Care to guess?"

Suddenly feverish and weak, the pain from my regenerating eye stabbing through my head, healing factors revving up for another agony trip. Lousy timing. Before I keel over, I slide onto the nearby couch, "Nah, forget it."

"You're white as a ghost! Are you all right?"

Like you really care. "What's the kid's story?"

“She was in a sub-par batch bound for destruction. I took the batch and had a colleague help me implant the embryos. Six developed, but in the twelfth week I miscarried. I thought I’d lost all of them, but Wendy remained.”

“How did you that get past Replications?”

“Obviously I didn’t. But, carrying multiples, I went on medical leave. When I lost them, I’d already tendered a transfer so there was no reason to let anyone know I’d not lost them all.”

“Why’d ya do it?”

“I had my reasons and they’re deeply personal.”

“Why’d ya pick me or is that deeply personal too?”

“It is, but it’s fair I share them. Out of the five, you and David North were the best. David was...is still alive, as far as I know, so it would have been wrong of me to have a child of his without his consent.”

“Right, but I’m dead so, hey, why not?”

“No. It wasn’t that way. I loved you once and I thought you felt the same. In a bizarre way, I felt having your child was a way to keep something of you alive. And you don’t know how much I wish that Wendy’s other half was mine.”

Ain’t touchin’ those sentiments with a ten-foot pole, even if I believe ‘em.

That squirrely buzz sets up in my head again, a memory from a lifetime ago: o-dark thirty in the morning, reachin’ across the sheets to an empty, cold spot. Crack open an eye. See dim light coming from another room. Ease up behind her, all set for more action, and what’s the slut doing? Sending off a performance report of our nightly activities!

“Didn’t have anything t’do with love, Marla. Think I didn’t catch on to what was goin’ on? Couldn’t pick yer nose or take a leak without somebody documenting it.”

She won’t look me in the eye. “We all had our difficult tasks. I’m sorry.”

“Yep. Science project of the moment, eh?”

She looks like she’s going to crumble to dust. “Logan, I fell in love with you.”

Lingering pheromones says she still does. Staring at a dot of lint on the carpet, “Tough luck,” comes out polar and I mean it that way. Don’t want her under any illusions. It’s time to get off this locomotive to nowhere. “So, ‘bout the kid, what do ya want me to do?”

“What can you do?”

“Right now, I dunno. You made a good move when you brought her here. How much have ya told Charles?”

“Only the basics.”

“Ok. Step one is to brief him -- thoroughly. Wendy’s a security nightmare and there’s stuff that’s gonna hafta happen.”

She hugs her midsection and the stress hormones rocket off her. “He wouldn’t turn us away?”

“No worries there. This place is a haven for messed-up cases. He took me in.”

That evokes a grin. “Brave soul,” she chuckles.

I flash a half grin in return. “Or nuts,” then serious once more, “I’m gonna be honest about something.”

“Go on.”

“Wendy’s gotta know everything.”

“I don’t agree.”

“Get yer head outta the sand, woman! Reps will do *anything* to get her. Unless we lock her up, there’s no way to protect her twenty-four seven. Knowledge is self-protective power.”

“She’ll hate me.”

“I guarantee she’ll hate you more when she figures it out on her own. And Marla, she’s close.”

“I’m afraid you’re right. If I could just tell her the circumstances without naming names.”

“I ain’t gonna dictate how you handle it, but ya better think it through. She’s a crack telepath, strong empath and she’s smart as a whip. Neither of us can shield her forever.”

xXx

SEVERAL DAYS LATER

Half an hour late, me and Logan strolling hand in hand, secret grins pasted on our faces, we arrive at the meeting in Charles’ conference room. I swear I detect a knowing, mischievous smirk on his face.

Hank, leaning an elbow on the table, is sipping coffee and reading a newspaper. He glances up and flashes us a brief thin lipped smile, “Morning.”

Marla Jennings, seated at the far end of the oval table, exams her fingernails. She's obviously uncomfortable.

We ease by her and Logan sniffs making a big to-do parsing scents. There is such a suffocating aura of tension even I can feel it without juiced senses.

She glares at my husband and mutters, "Pig."

Smiling sourly, I squeeze Logan's hand hoping he'll get it and not respond in kind.

"Ladies and gentlemen, thank you for gathering on such short notice," Charles says. "Logan, Susan, so glad you could make it."

While sliding a chair out for me, Logan grunts. Afterglow, no doubt ruined by the company, he's got an intimidating scowl creasing his features. Mmm, on second thought, with the eye patch he looks positively nasty.

Without further comment, Charles begins, "You all must understand that it is not my habit to interfere in your personal lives."

Snorting, Logan rocks back on his chair. "So don't," he replies, not exactly under his breath.

I don't have to see Scott's eyes to know he's blasting Logan's attitude with disapproval.

Ignoring both men, Charles continues, "However, when circumstances pose an impact on the Team, I will act to preserve unity and readiness."

That gets their attention.

"I've become aware of information that will affect every one of us in this room and this information, indeed, does have the potential to adversely impact the Team."

Drumming his fingers on the conference table, Logan demands, "Get to the point, Charles."

"Very well. Last evening's events came about through a question Logan posed to Doctor Jennings. That question deserves an answer. Doctor Jennings, please be so kind."

With a thump, Logan plants all four chair legs on the floor and leans forward, "Whoa! Hold up, Charles." His eyes dart between Hank and Scott, "Just what questions we talking about here?"

Charles doesn't respond verbally, but whatever he says earns a begrudging nod from Logan.

Logan eyes weigh Marla with a critical squint. "Ok, talk."

Her discomfort is plain as she wrings her hands and clears her throat. "You...you asked who Wendy's biological mother is."

Impatient, he snaps, "I know what I asked."

Under the table, I rub my foot against his shin, a secret admonition to give her a chance.

She bites right back, "Don't interrupt me and I'll give you an answer." They engaged in an ocular shooting match before she continues.

"I explained before that Wendy is the product of in-vitro reproductive technology. However, it goes quite a bit further than that. You are aware that the genome of homo sapiens is composed of 23 pairs of chromosomes with a total of approximately 3 billion..."

Logan glazes over. "I ain't in the market for a frickin' Ph.D in genetics. Get to the point."

"Fine." She looks on him as one might a person with mental challenges. "Simplified, Replications discovered how to strip the nucleus of an ovum and replace it with another specifically designed nucleus, thus making it possible to alter and enhance mutant capacities."

"That isn't cloning," Logan mutters, becoming silent and contemplative. He starts to rub both eyes, but the patch on his left one prevents it. Exploding suddenly with a foul curse, he glares accusatively. "You're talking about...*mutating* a mutant?"

"Yes." Marla is unapologetic.

Logan looks like I feel, like we're both about to be ill. Scott seems uncomfortable as well, intensely studying Marla and twiddling a pen between his fingers. Hank, sitting erect with folded hands resting on the tabletop, wears an unreadable expression. Charles posture and expression seems to be a close copy of Hank's.

Logan leans toward Marla, his eyes sharp and questioning. "Something doesn't make sense. If ya got this whiz-bang method for making designer mutants, what did ya need me for?"

"It was discovered success depended upon an Omega or Alpha healing factor. Considering the limited sources for healing factor extraction, spermatozoa yielded the highest levels and, for reasons we still don't fully understand, it's the only substance that produces viable results."

"Geez, ya talk like this is still going on."

"I think that's a given," she replies dryly. Almost whimsically, she adds, "Imagine the advances they've made in a

decade's time."

Logan goes quiet, his dark eyebrows slanted in a troubled frown. "Ya told me why I got to be the lucky guy, but how could ya not wanna know who else went into making the kid?"

Marla looks exasperated, pressing her hands forcefully together in front of her face. "Oh, you just can't seem to get it." Fisting a hand, she gesticulates toward Logan. "I didn't *have* access to the information about whom all the DNA was derived from and I really didn't *want* to know. However, I *did* know what traits had been synthesized into certain ovum because the DNA samples were coded alpha numerically based on..."

"Right," Logan roars, slamming his hand on the table top. "Flippin' designator numbers. I had one, remember? What's Wendy's? A combination of me and the woman's?"

Marla's head dips and her voice breaks, "Yes."

Logan laughs bitterly. "And the kid got a mindful of this crap?"

"Thanks to *you*," Marla lambastes.

Charles interrupts politely, "This is an issue best handled through a different venue."

Ignoring Charles, Logan berates, "Hell, if you're gonna pin it all on me. If ya'd..."

"Enough!" Charles commands and in a stern tone rebukes, "For Wendy's sake, the two of you *must* come to an understanding and a workable strategy concerning further disclosures and her care, but *this* is neither the time nor the place for such negotiations."

Marla seems pleased by Charles intervention, but a rumble comes from my husband and it's not his stomach growling for a meal. His scolding expression further clarifies his sentiments.

Determined to tightly control the course of the meeting, Charles inquires, "Logan, has Doctor Jennings sufficiently answered your questions regarding Wendy's origins?"

Cocking his head to one side, brows knit together across the bridge of his nose, he grinds, "Maybe. Yeah, for now."

"Very well." Maneuvering his chair back from the table, Charles wheels to Marla and offers his hand, "Thank you Doctor. You may be excused."

Rejecting Charles courtesy with a loud, "Harrumph," she turns on her heel and stalks away. Suddenly, she whips around and hisses, "How dare you!"

"Madam," Charles counters. "I dare nothing. You are projecting with such vigor it simply cannot be missed."

Telepathic bickering? Pretty much. I stifle the snicker, but not a crooked smirk. If the airhead kept her mouth shut, nobody would've known.

"Since you prefer open communication," Charles continues, "I shall express a concern and an opinion that is likely to be shared among everyone in this room."

Arms folded across her chest, Marla's expression is rigid and scornful. "I don't wish to hear your concerns or opinions either telepathically or verbally."

"And that is," he barrels ahead despite her protest, "you'd be committing a grievous misstep removing yourself and the child from the protection of this institute."

Logan's head snaps up, his eyes blazing as he warns, "Don't even think about it, woman."

Marla looks like the cat that swallowed a canary. Red in the face, she turns with a jerk and flounces from the room. A costly crystal frame topples off a credenza from the door slamming.

Scott reacts, scrambling to gather up the broken glass, "Should I go after her?"

Charles answers, "No. Give her time..."

Logan, fast on his feet, interrupts, "I got it."

"Uh-huh, that's going fix it," Scott complains as Logan disappears from our sight.

Interceding again, Charles speaks calmly, "Scott, believe me, this isn't your battle. Please have a seat."

Through the open door, we hear Marla's shrill, furious voice, but only a muffled word or two of Logan's:

"Is that a threat?...you have no say in our affairs...biology does *not* make a father, you of all people have a keen understanding..."

Oh, that witch! As if Logan chose illegitimacy.

Logan explodes, "Shut up, Marla!" before his words become inaudible again.

A sudden, sharp crack of flesh meeting flesh makes me jump in my seat. Did he smack her one? No scream, so I guess not.

Silence ensues for a moment before we hear a set of heels click rapidly down the hall. A second later, Logan strolls back into the conference room. Obvious to everyone is a rapidly fading handprint visible where his sideburns don't grow.

As he takes the seat next to me, I can't resist feathering my fingertips against his cheek. I am going to make mincemeat out of that woman.

He grasps my hand, kisses it and murmurs, "Relax, darlin'. It's ok."

Hands steepled at chest level, Charles clears his throat, "We must commence with the second portion of our agenda." He pauses, waiting for our rapt attention. "What I am now compelled to reveal is of an extremely delicate and personal nature to everyone. Because of that, I shall conduct the discussion in two segments. Hank, you may be excused, but stay close, please."

"Right. Is my lab too far?"

"Not at all. Scott, please excuse us until I summon you."

Scott looks hurt and vexed. "Professor?"

"Trust me, please. You shall not be deleted from the loop in any way that pertains to your or the teams' interests."

Logan reacts, "This is stupid. Just what the hell's going on?"

"Logan, please control yourself. My reason for my method will become clear once you and Susan have heard what I have to say."

Scott departs muttering his displeasure, leaving me with knot of tension in my chest and Logan looking intensely frustrated.

"Susan, before we begin, I ask you not to hold any ill will against Hank, who is source of the information I'm about to share."

Now I'm thoroughly confused. "What the heck are we talking about?"

"Wendy's parentage."

Oh, that's old news. Relieved, I reply, "We figured out half...er, one-third if you want precision, when Hank's computer froze. And then that whole mess started..."

"Yes, I understand, but I must be honest. Hank's computer did not freeze-up."

"Are you saying he... he concealed something from us?"

"No. His intention was to keep the information to himself until he could speak to the two of you privately. However, while he and I were treating Wendy, he projected unusually high levels of anxiety. In a private moment I questioned him."

Logan finally adds his two-cents worth, "Ya know what, Charles? Kiss n' tell around this joint is nothing new. Give it up, will ya?"

"Very well." Charles drums his fingers on the arm rest of his wheelchair. Obviously stalling, he rubs a hand over his scalp while we stare at him. "You both must understand that Henry and I rechecked the data several times. Once certain, we spent most of last night deliberating over it."

I'm anxious, yet intrigued---no, make that rear-end clenched freaked out!

If Logan were a volcano, steam would be shooting from his ears. Ejecting himself from the seat, he erupts, "How freakin' hard can it be? Yer acting like it's gonna be..."

Logan stops dead in his tracks. His eyes go wide and he leans both arms on the table. "Nah. No, no, no."

"No what?" I shout unnecessarily. I try throttling back. "Both of you, no telepathy. Please."

My eyes dart a mile a second between both men. I don't need telepathy to sense a missile is about to come crashing down on our heads.

Intense, pained steel blue eyes meet and lock with burning, insolent brown eyes. Charles straightens himself in his wheelchair and fires the projectile.

"Yes, Logan. Wendy's second DNA match belongs to Jean."

The End