

Title: After El Paso - Chapter 1

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Pairing: Logan and Cassie Lathrop

Rating: PG (this part)

Summary: This story takes place after the Coyote Crossing story arc in the Wolverine comic series. Our story actually begins at the last few panels of that story line.

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“Well, I guess you'd better come inside.” Cassie invited, then she turned and headed back into the house, leading her unexpected visitor down the hall as she tried to collect her thoughts. Glancing over her shoulder briefly, as if to confirm the reality of the moment, she frowned a bit of concern at the man following her down the small hallway without speaking a word.

'Well here's a turn-up for the books. I know what I said back in El Paso, but I didn't expect to see him so soon. Hell, I didn't really expect to see him at all. Jeeze, look at the state I'm in, was just getting ready to curl up in front of the TV for the night, wasn't expecting to entertain guests. What are you saying, Cas? This isn't a fashion parade.'

She led him into the dimly lit living room. The TV was on with some old black and white movie playing on the screen. The room was large, pretty sparse, with a dresser covering one wall and a vase atop it containing a single silk rose. There were several large candles on one shelf and a large collection of books on another. Two large, well-worn couches and an armchair dominated the room. A plateful of half-eaten sandwiches and an open magazine sat abandoned on one arm of the chair.

“I wasn't expecting guests,” she smiled a bit awkwardly, as if to apologize for the casual, lived-in look of the room as his eyes roamed over their surroundings, as if committing everything he saw to memory.

The way he never seemed to miss a thing made Cassie Lathrop suddenly feel a bit exposed and she pulled her robe tighter around herself as if the thin material would protect her from his dark gaze. She watched him silently for a moment, then became aware of Logan's bedraggled appearance.

“Jeeze, look at you. You're soaking wet,” she told him, as if he wasn't aware of the fact. “Just make yourself at home, I'll get you a towel,” she offered as she disappeared around the corner and down the hall, leaving Logan standing in the middle of the room. “There's some beers in the fridge!” Her voice echoed up the hallway, before becoming more subdued as she entered the bathroom at the far end of the hall. “The kitchen's to your left... second shelf. Help yourself.”

Logan made a mental note of the offer but he didn't move. He was exhausted - mind and body - too tired to move another step, too tired to even think. He stood there, water dripping down his face from his disheveled bangs, a darkening circle beginning to show on the rug beneath his feet. He waited, silently, for her to return. Not caring about much at the moment, except her return.

It seemed to take all of his strength just to keep breathing. He didn't turn around when she came back into the room, he didn't even lift his eyes from the floor to look at her when she stepped back in front of him. He wasn't even sure what he was doing here. Why had he come? Why'd he come here? Why'd he come here, to her? Sighing heavily, he finally raised tired eyes to look at her.

He thought of getting out of there. *'I shouldn't be here. What am I doin?'* Logan asked himself silently. *'Get the hell outta here, before....'*

His thoughts trailed off as he looked up at her, the way she was looking back at him. He couldn't make his feet move to leave - to get away, to get away from her... Truth be told? Deep, deep down... he didn't wanna leave.

“Logan? Are you alright?” she asked softly, seeing the puddles of water forming around his feet. A look of worry furrowed Cassie's brow as her gaze was met by two deeply-pained blue eyes. His expression said it all, he looked like he was fit to drop and her cop's intuition told her something must have happened since she'd left him on that balcony two weeks ago.

Moving slowly and calmly she stepped around him. “Here, take off your jacket,” she invited, taking the collar of the dripping leather in her hands. She held the heavy jacket as he slowly rolled out of it, letting it fall into her arms. Carefully she placed it over the back of a wooden chair just behind them, in the hallway, and returned to her charge. “Here, wrap yourself in these,” she added, holding out two large white towels and he reached out slowly to take one from her. “Jeeze, what the hell's happened to you Logan?”

The red and black plaid shirt clung to his back as droplets of water continued to drip from the untucked hem. She studied him as he half-heartedly wiped his face with the soft towel. He looked lost in his thoughts, unsure of himself and, if she hadn't known any better, a little afraid; not at all the man who'd busted the living hell out of Cry's men in Westfall not too long ago.

“If you don't mind me saying, you look like crap,” she told him truthfully and he raised his eyes to her almost apologetically as he patted the damp towel against the front of his soaked shirt. Cassie's expression softened a bit and she let out a soft sigh. Taking the towel from his hands she slung it across his shoulders to drape across his back “Here, come and sit down.”

Taking him gently by the arm she moved around the armchair and led him to the couch. He dropped down heavily, sinking slightly into the seat cushion, and she watched visible signs of relief spread across his face as the soft, pillow-like padding took his weight.

Moving the plate of sandwiches onto the side table, Cassie climbed into the armchair, drawing up her legs and tucking her feet under her. She pulled the old, thinning, and now slightly damp, robe around her and watched him in silence as the television flashed haunting light across his features. She knew enough about this man to know that he would speak when he was ready.

Cassie hadn't forgotten the harsh words she had spoken to him after the death of Rojas. He'd been disturbed greatly by her death and, instead of offering comfort, she'd tossed cold, impersonal logic at him.

~ *"I don't have time for animals. When you decide that you're a man, you know where to find me."*
~ That's what she'd said to him. That was the best she'd had to offer.

'Nice, Cas, real nice,' she scowled outwardly at herself, but inwardly she realized it must've taken a great deal of effort on his part to make the decision to come here. His stoic expression remained as he sat staring at the floor, unblinking, unmoving; only his chest rose and fell smoothly with his steady breathing.

In the weeks that followed their encounter in El Paso, she'd tried to put him out of her mind; to get on with her job and her life. But occasionally he'd crept back into her thoughts; triggered by a word, a smell, a look, and she'd wondered where he was at that very moment... or what he was doing.

Now... here he sat, in her living room - cold, wet, exhausted and alone. He was always alone - even amongst his friends, she'd noticed. He kept them at a distance and they not only respected that, but seemed to understand it. They seemed to understand him.

She wanted to understand him, too. Ever since her role in the investigation uncovered the existence of *'the hairy little man with claws'*, as he was described by witnesses... she'd been intrigued by him.

She was on his trail, hunting him, for suspicion of murder. Obviously a dangerous man - her prime suspect - and she'd felt exhilaration at her every thought of finally catching up with him, but it wasn't for professional reasons. No matter how much she'd pretended otherwise, *'Agent Cassie Lathrop of the ATF'* hunted him for more personal reasons.

He was a mystery. From the moment she'd heard the crazy stories that the witnesses had rattled off in their excitement, he had her full attention. A man... with claws? How? A man... more like an animal, but not an animal? Intriguing... dangerous... exciting.

She watched him quietly from her seat, in the flickering light he looked surreal. Like a dream... He sat rock still - like a statue, or... or like a wounded animal who's gone to ground, hiding safely while wounds healed.

Hiding safely? Here? With her? Did he really feel safe here with her? Is that why he came to her? A soft smile played across her lips with that thought.

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Logan had no idea how long he'd sat there, staring at the floor with unseeing eyes. Blind and deaf to everything around him but the images running through his mind and, despite the pain, he felt numb in both mind and body.

As he slowly emerged from his contemplative trance, his awareness began to return. The first thing he became aware of was that he was cold, wet and hungry... and he was tired.

'God... so tired.'

He was vaguely aware of the sporadic light flashing it's eerie blue aura across the darkened room, until the quiet tones of the movie classic ended abruptly, replaced by an obtrusive infomercial. Logan raised his eyes to the blaring television to his left, where the commercial's host insisted on shouting his message to, what Logan suspected was supposed to be, an equally excitable audience.

As he stared blankly at the television, a row of green vertical bars appeared across the bottom of the screen and, one by one, they began to vanish and so, with them, did the obnoxious pitch of the overly excited actor.

'Volume control... Hnh?'

He turned his eyes away from the now silent image, slowly scanning the room for whomever was controlling the remote.

'Where am I?' His brow knitted slightly as he took in his surroundings. He didn't recognize the furnishings, the room, the layout... *'Where am I?'*

As he continued to scan the darkened room, aided only by the disorienting effects from the t.v. screen, he caught sight of her out of the corner of his eye. At the same time, he became aware of her scent and Logan froze as his heart leapt into his throat.

His reaction wasn't outwardly visible to her, but Cassie sensed his brief panic. She sat quietly, still holding the remote aloft in front of her, not wanting to make any sudden movements until he got his bearings. Something was definitely wrong with him and whatever it was had him off balance, that was obvious.

"Cass?" he ventured, his voice barely a whisper.

"Yes, Logan. Are you alright?" she asked, placing the controller on the table beside her.

"I don't know," he answered in a hoarse tone, the words breaking up and falling away as he spoke them. Placing her feet back on the floor, Cassie leaned forward in her seat a bit concerned.

"What's happened, Logan?" she asked. He didn't answer. He seemed to be withdrawing back into his internal thoughts again, but Cassie Lathrop wanted answers. "Logan?"

"I wanna forget," he droned out. He responded to her questions although his eyes focused inward.

"Forget what?"

"I wanna be a man."

"You *are* a man," she replied.

"Some say I'm an animal." Logan droned matter-of-factly and Cassie winced with the memory of what she'd said to him.

"You're not an animal," she remarked lightly, moving forward slightly to reach out a hand to him. She paused before touching him, something stopping her as her hand hovered above his knee.

"A man... does the right thing. I wanna do the right things."

"You *do* do the right things," she replied, withdrawing her hand to let him continue un-distracted.

"Not all the time. I wanna do the right things all the time. Don't wanna be an animal. Wanna be a man... all the time. I wanna forget," he droned on. Cassie frowned as she listened to his half thoughts and broken speech. "They got a pill now. Heard it on the radio. At the bar. A pill. To make ya' forget. A pill to forget. To take away yer memories."

"What are you talking about, Logan?" Cassie asked with a frown. He was beginning to worry her now, these disjointed ramblings were beginning to verge on the manic.

"A pill! It's a pill!" He suddenly shouted in frustration of her not understanding. His sudden agitation put her on high alert quickly, but she didn't react outwardly except to straighten in her seat again. "A pill to forget! A pill to take away our memories! It's as easy as that now! They don't need to torture us anymore to wipe our minds clean. All ya' gotta do is pop a pill!"

Logan's angry voice rose as he became more agitated and Cassie's concern rose with it. But he didn't move from the couch, he didn't shift positions at all. He just let it out, staring at the floor; his eyes wide and unseeing, as his hands clenched the edge of the cushion to either side of him in tight fists.

"Easy, Logan. One thing at a time," she suggested in a well-practiced methodical tone. "What pills are you talking about? What is it you want to forget?" She inquired, trying to maintain the composure in her voice.

"It was on the radio," Logan repeated vaguely. Cassie slipped slowly from the armchair to the floor and, so as not to spook him, eased herself across to where he was sitting and placed herself in front of him.

"Who tortured you, Logan?" she asked in a near whisper, now terribly concerned.

"I dunno... people... military maybe? Dunno."

She risked a comforting touch to his leg, knowing it was a calculated risk; he would either accept it and start to let her in, or her touch would push him over the edge and she'd seen, firsthand, the damage he could inflict when pushed past his limits. He remained unmoved though, and she let out an audible sigh of relief.

With much effort, Logan slowly moved his eyes to focus on the small hand on his knee. The deep crease in his forehead eased slightly at the sight, his expression softening a bit. He lifted his gaze to meet her eyes, for the first time really, since his unexpected arrival at her house.

"I'm not an animal," he told her softly, the words seeming to lock in his throat. "I just wanna forget it, ya' know? Forget what they did... what they did to me, what they turned me into," he whispered in a low, raspy voice.

"Logan? What did these people do to you?"

"Don't know, really..." he had to admit with an ironic grin.

"Then what is it that you wish to forget?" she asked, still trying to determine the cause of his angst. As she asked him that question, he had his eyes focused on her mouth, watching it form the words she spoke as if needing the visual confirmation of what she was saying. Logan's forehead creased again; his heavy brows knitting together as he frowned at her. Her question repeated in his head like a broken tape recording and he blinked at her as if through blurred vision.

"What?" he finally asked.

"I said, 'what is it that you wish to forget?'" she repeated for him without concern.

"What do I wish to forget?" he echoed as if not understanding her question and Cassie nodded in affirmation. Then Logan's expression turned foul as he sneered at her.

"I dont wanna forget anythin'!" He shouted at her tryin' to make her understand. He continued to yell back at her as if Cassie Lathrop herself held the means to vanquish Logan's remaining memories. "I don't wanna forget I'm a man! I don't wanna forget what they did to me! That's the point! That's the whole point, don'tcha get it?? It could happen without me even knowin' it! It could happen to *you without yer consent too!*" Then he stopped and stared at her, catching his breath. When he spoke again his voice was calm and quiet, almost conspiratorial in tone. "Who would know, huh? Huh? Nobody. Slip ya' a pill an' poof... all gone." He leaned forward, nearly face to face with her and whispered softly. "And you'd never know... and you wouldn't remember that you ever forgot."

Cassie stared at the bemused expression on Logan's face and wondered if he'd lost his mind. It was obvious that the knowledge of this pill had confused and agitated him, but was this "pill" real or had he imagined it in his exhausted state? Perhaps even have dreamt about it during a fitful sleep? It's possible his mind was playing tricks on him, he was exhausted and certainly not thinking clearly. Making a decision to take control of the situation, she gave him something to focus on.

"Logan? Listen to me," she started with a gentle but authoritative tone and he looked at her. "I want you to take a hot shower, okay? You're drenched and chilled to the bone."

'To the bone... not my bones.....' he almost smirked, dropping his gaze, but Cas continued, disrupting his thought.

"Hypothermia affects the thought processes. Understand?" she asked and Logan nodded, but she didn't feel he was really listening to her. "Logan?" She waited until he actually looked up at her to be sure he was paying attention. "Take a shower. I'll make you some eggs and coffee and then you get some rest. Alright?" He nodded. "You'll feel much better after you do all those things, okay?"

Logan nodded again and she got off the floor and helped him to his feet. Leading him down the hall to the bathroom, she turned on the shower to a steaming temperature and placed a couple of large fluffy towels on the sink counter.

"There's shower stuff in the cubicle, help yourself. When you're undressed, throw your clothes out to me and I'll get them dry." He nodded and she smiled at him before stepping out of the bathroom, closing the door behind her.

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Cassie leaned against the wall for a moment, letting out a deep sigh as she waited in the hall, her mind full of Logan's strange rantings; the memory loss, the torture, the pills. It all seemed so far-fetched, yet so real to him. *'I have to find out more. The more he tells me the more questions I have. He must've been through some bad shit in his life to end up this way. Hopefully the shower and some food will calm him down enough for me to make sense of what he's saying. Well Cass looks like you're going to have some company for a little while,'* she smiled to herself, *'and that is no bad thing.'*

Her train of thought was broken as the door to her left opened a couple of inches to let a large hand pass through. Several items of clothing dropped to the floor and the door closed. Cassie scooped up the wet jeans, T-shirt, shirt and socks and set off for the laundry room. With his clothes safely in the dryer she returned to the kitchen. He'd been in her home for over an hour and she had offered him

nothing. *'He must be ravenous,'* she thought as she pulled a box of eggs, a sliced ham and some left-over potatoes from the fridge, busying herself with preparing him a hot meal. An extra-large pan of soup completed the spread. *'Just in case,'* she thought cheerfully.

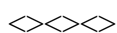
From the other side of the wall, the sound of running water ceased. Cassie fetched the now soft, warm clothes from the dryer and headed back to the bathroom, the smell of frying eggs following her down the passage. The sight that greeted her was enough to cause her to nearly drop the pile of freshly dried garments.

The door to the bathroom was ajar, allowing the thick steam to escape into the corridor. Inside, shrouded in the opaque mist, stood her half-naked visitor. Cassie's eyes widened in surprise and a slight feeling of delight fluttered across her chest as she watched him for a moment. It wasn't very often that the hard-nosed ATF officer was stuck for words, but the sight before her stunned her into silence. He stood solidly, feet firmly braced, with his head buried in a towel, giving her the opportunity to examine his physique. Broad, thickly muscled shoulders - flexing as he moved his arms - a wide chest with well-defined pecs, covered in a dark swath of thick black hair which tapered down, she noted with growing interest, to a point at his belly button, then trailing downward in a thick dark line and disappearing under the large towel he had fastened around his wide hips. Logan, sensing her presence looked up from under the towel.

"Those fer me?" he asked.

"Umm... I... uh... ye... yes, umm... yes, all dry now," she stammered as the colour rose in her cheeks. She stepped into the small room and held out the bundle in her arms, caught off guard and feeling like a peeping-tom. Logan stepped forward, a quizzical look on his face as Cassie tried to look everywhere but right at him. "Umm...here," she said, forcing the clothes into his hands. "You can... umm... get dressed here or in the guest room...top of the stairs, door on the right," she added, turning to leave. "I made you some food too, when you're ready," she called over her shoulder.

Logan smiled gratefully, and set the bundle of clothes on the sink counter as one hand came down to loosen the tuck and the towel fell heavily to the floor.



"Damn it Cass, the guy's exhausted and in distress, and you're thinking thoughts like that," she muttered aloud as she angrily spooned the eggs onto a plate. But the residual images of an all-too vivid and recent dream, which she'd been unable to shake for weeks, kept replaying in her mind. "Get a grip Cassie," she hissed through gritted teeth and unceremoniously tossed the fried potatoes next to the eggs.

"Smells good," came a soft, rumbling voice from the doorway. Startled, she twisted around, nearly sending the contents of the plate onto the floor. She hadn't heard him enter the room and Cassie's cheeks blanched wickedly with the thought that he'd overheard her mutterings.

"Oh, umm... it's just something I threw together," she tried to smile. "Come and sit down." Clearly the shower had done him some good. He looked considerably refreshed and a bit more in control. "Feeling better?"

"Yeh... thanks," Logan replied, rubbing his hand roughly into his damp hair. As he raised his arm, the front of the unbuttoned flannel opened and Cassie couldn't help herself; she appreciated his well-muscled torso and took pleasure in the opportunity to check it out one more time. He'd also put

on his tight, well-fitted jeans and his white socks and he stood there looking really casual and... really short without his boots. She smiled softly and sighed deeply. The scent of freshly showered male mixed in the air with the aroma of fried food and for a brief moment she felt a warm sensation spreading through her chest. It'd been quite a while since she'd had a man about the house.

She motioned to the table and offered him a seat as she placed a set of silverware haphazardly in front of the chair she'd indicated. As Logan moved toward the table he glanced at her and smiled and Cassie could see the spark had returned to his eyes. He slid into the chair, between the table and wall, and facing the stove he watched her quietly as she tossed the ham onto the plate and slid it in front of him. He tucked his chair under and placed the napkin on his knee as she poured two cups of coffee and came to sit across from him.

He glanced at the steaming mug as he picked up the fork and flashed her a smile in appreciation. Leaning forward slightly as he brought a forkful to his mouth, he glanced up at her to see her watching him closely. Suddenly feeling a bit uncomfortable under her stare, he chewed the mouthful slowly trying to think of something to say.

"Is it ok?" she asked, as he finally swallowed.

"Yeh... it's great," he answered, scooping up more of the eggs.

Cassie put down her cup and nervously ran a finger around the rim. Now was as good a time as any to ask him the heap of questions that have been churning around in her head since she'd left him in El Paso. But she didn't want to spook him, or make him bolt; she knew, that in his present state of mind, she'd need to tread carefully.

"Logan," she ventured slowly. "I've been wondering for a while now... what happened to the baby?" Surprised momentarily by the question, Logan stopped in motion and glanced at her. Then, regaining his composure he deliberately continued eating - his manner consciously controlled.

"What'dya mean?" he asked, shaking a bit of salt onto his food.

"Well....did you leave her with Nestor or take her to the authorities?"

"Neither," Logan replied vaguely, setting the shaker down.

"So, what happened to her?" She asked but Logan ignored the question, scooping up another forkful. Cassie hated this side of him. She was used to interrogating people for hours, sometimes days, but she couldn't figure out why this man wouldn't let her in. He wasn't wanted - as far as warrants go - but he was such a mystery and he seemed to fight her every effort to get to know him, on any level, no matter what she did. Slightly irritated but unperturbed she continued with a less direct approach. "You know... I'm sorry that I was so hard on you back there," she offered. Logan looked up at her, his brow furrowing in question. "I mean about Rojas' death and all." Remembering the scenario on the balcony, he gave a single nod in acknowledgement but didn't say a word.

Cassie's gaze moved to the coffee swirling in the cup in front of her with a momentary far-away look in her eyes as she made her attempt to apologize. "I never meant to accuse you of killing her. It's just the cop in me, I guess." Logan glanced up at her again as he continued to eat.

"Yeh, I guess," he replied in an almost sarcastic tone as he turned his attention back to the plate in front of him. Cassie's gaze was drawn back to him and she watched him for a moment as he took a

few more bites, not offering or even attempting to give her the answers she was seeking. Crossing her arms against the edge of the table, she leaned forward slightly in order to speak softly, hoping to keep him from adopting a defensive posture.

"It must've been tough watching her die like that..." She began and Logan shot her an icy stare as he slowly slid another mouthful from the fork. "... having to deliver the baby and all," she added, hoping to trigger an emotional response. She didn't want to upset him, but any emotion would be better than this. "You did the right thing."

"So I've heard," he replied off-handedly, cutting a piece of meat from the ham steak on his plate and popping it into his mouth. He rested his forearms against the table's edge, utensils held in fisted hands, and leaned back in the chair to look at her with an even expression and a steady stare.

"I meant what I said you know... back there. About you not being an animal," she offered earnestly, but she could've sworn she saw a glint of humor in his eye. He didn't smile or even acknowledge her though, he just chewed that chunk of meat slow and deliberate. "I'm glad you made up your mind. To come here, I mean. What made you decide... to come here?" she asked inquisitively.

"At the moment, I have no idea," he replied with a hint of humor, as he dropped his gaze and went back to his meal. Cassie's mouth quirked at the one-line jab, but she caught herself. It took her a moment to get control over the smile that wanted to spread across her face and then she refocused and tried another tactic.

"I never thanked you for hauling my ass out of that fire."

"Yer welcome," he replied as he got busy with the remainder of his meal. A silence descended on the kitchen as Cassie sipped her coffee thoughtfully, remembering that day. Then her eyes narrowed at him and she put her cup down as a thought came to her.

"What's with the vigilante stuff anyway?" She asked, the inquiring cop persona returning, but Logan continued to eat his meal and drink his coffee as if she hadn't spoken at all. Disregarding his reticence to answer, she persisted with her line of questioning. "I mean, from the moment I met you it seemed like I was just following a trail of bodies."

"That's not true," Logan offered back lifting the napkin and wiping his mouth, before replacing it in his lap and continuing his meal.

"Yes, it is true." She answered, a bit more sharply than she intended.

"Nooo, it's not," Logan countered again and, as Cassie opened her mouth to protest again, he added, "you were already followin' the trail of bodies before we actually met. That's *why* we met." Logan looked up at her with an "*Am right*" expression on his face, and Cassie conceded with a nod.

"Yeah... okay that's true," she smiled a little, remembering their first encounter. "So? Why are you trying to put down the bad guys?"

"Because they deserve to *be* put down," he replied in a casual tone as he tore a bread roll in half with his fingers.

"Why you?"

"Cuz I can," Logan answered matter-of-factly, as he buttered a piece of the bread.

"Who says you can? Who made it your job?" She asked, her tone slipping easily into interrogation mode from years of practice.

"You did."

"Excuse me?" she replied, setting her cup down hard on the table.

"People *like* you," Logan exacted.

"People like me," Cassie repeated dryly, just knowing there was an offensive remark hiding in there somewhere.

"Yeh... cops."

"How did the **cops** make it your job?" The edginess in her tone told him that she was anticipating the offense.

"By not doin' theirs."

~ *And there it is.* ~

"Logan, the cops do their jobs," she told him. When he looked at her as if to say "yeah right" she quickly added, "... but they have rules to follow... regulations and standard operating procedures..."

"... and I don't," Logan interjected as a matter of recourse. He placed his fork across his empty plate and wiped his mouth a final time, then placed the napkin next to the plate. He looked at her, square in the eye, challenging her to debate the logic with him.

Cassie considered giving him the lecture about how we all have rules to follow or even reading him the "riot act" regarding vigilantism. But she'd seen the bodies of the nineteen men, women and children that Rojas had smuggled into the country in the back of an eighteen wheeler, and then just let them suffocate in the Texas heat. The cop in her told her it was wrong what he did, but the emotional side of her was glad for what he gave the bad guys in return.

"You might put me out of work, you know," she conceded with a conspiratorial smirk. Caught off-guard, Logan blinked at her and his brow furrowed in confusion, which made Cassie laugh at his befuddled _expression. Twisting out of her chair, she grabbed the empty mugs. "More coffee?"

"How about that beer now?" He suggested instead. Cassie nodded in approval and placed the mugs in the sink, then went to the fridge.

"You know... I met your Army buddy... Blaine," she mentioned casually as she reached inside the refrigerator. With the two beers in hand she turned toward him. "He showed me a picture of the two of you... from years ago." Elbowing the door shut she returned to the table and handed him a bottle. "Your buddy's aged considerably since then."

~ *She's fishing again.* ~

"Yeh, well that was a long time ago."

"Mmmmm," she acknowledged, sliding back into her seat, "but you don't seem to age at all." She waited for a response but Logan simply untwisted the bottle cap and took a swig. "Is that part of your mutant powers or whatever you call them? You just don't age?"

"Yeh, right. I was born middle aged," he replied sarcastically then looked at her again.

"You know what I mean."

"Yeh, I know what ya' mean," he told her, then leaned forward with a sigh. "Yesss, it's part o' my mutation. I don't age at the same rate as most people... and I heal almost instantly... any wound, any illness, you name it." He stared at her for a moment, expecting to see the usual expression of pity or disgust that generally accompanied a specific explanation of his mutation.

Instead, he found an expression of fascination and curiosity - if not great interest and open acceptance - although a million more questions seemed to be swirling around in Cassie's head like, *'How and why?'* and *'What caused such a thing to happen?'* And at the same time she was growing more captivated by him and his lack of responses by the minute.

"I've never met anyone like you, Logan." Was all she could say. She tried to make it sound sincere, but it came out sounding all too corny.

"I'm sure o' that," he replied sardonically with a dark grin. Nonplussed, Cassie couldn't understand the caustic attitude he had for himself. She decided not to remark on that further at this time and proceeded to her next question, which she'd been dying to know since she first heard the rumors.

"So... how did you get those claws?" She asked, reaching out slowly to touch his hand. Logan pulled away in a smooth motion, mimicking her pace and giving the impression that there was a type of magnetic repulsion between them which caused his hand to retreat as she advanced. Cassie tried not to let her disappointment show on her face as she slowly withdrew her hand. She looked up at him and Logan stared at her calmly, blinking at her, before offering an answer.

"I was born with 'em," he stated plainly, just laying it all on the table and waited for her response. For a moment, all he got was her furrowed brow and he waited calmly.

"You were... but how? I mean, they're metal right? How could you be born with metal claws? I don't understand."

"I didn't say I was born with metal claws. I said I was born with claws. The metal came afterward." Logan droned out still awaiting the usual reaction.

"What about your family?" she asked, confused. "Do they have the same mutations?"

"I don't have any family," he told her. Then he thought about his answer for a moment and added, "If I do... I don't know where they are... or who they would be." Then he took a long pull from the half empty beer bottle and said quietly, "I don't know if they were mutants too... or if it was just me who got so lucky." Logan stared at his hand silently, closing his fingers tight to make a fist and watched the familiar movements beneath his skin as his muscles and tendons flexed, preparing for protraction. But he held them short of releasing the embodied metal scythes that were his personal burden. His mind drifted off for a moment as he considered their existence, then shook himself back to the present and fidgeted a bit uncomfortably.

"I'm sorry I shouldn't ask so many questions," she spoke apologetically, "that's not why you came all this way is it - to get a grilling from me. I just want to try and understand Logan, that's all." She smiled softly at him trying to break some of the tension between them.

He didn't know what to make of her, this woman, this cop. Back in El Paso she kept him on his toes. Her behavior was nearly caustic as an investigator and he'd tried to keep his distance but she'd showed up at his little hole-in-the-wall. He tried to keep her an arm's length away at all times, but she seemed to circle him, even asking to spend the night in his rented room. But even then, he didn't know if she'd asked to stay in the hopes of keeping him under surveillance or if she had hoped for something a bit more intimate that night. Either way, she didn't get it. Had that been a mistake, he wondered. Was it a mistake he could correct now?

"So, what's yer story?" He asked, looking at her with mock suspicion, trying to keep her from knowing his confusion about his feelings toward her. She did fascinate him, that was certain. She was strong and aggressive and able to take care of herself for the most part, but it was the vagueness surrounding her that had his interest. As much as she might be interested in his story, Logan was just as curious about what made her tick...Cassie Lathrop of the ATF. "What about yer family?" He asked, in an attempt to get the focus off himself. "Got any?"

She looked down into her beer, swilling it idly around in the bottle till it frothed up. He was a little surprised by her sudden coyness to answer his question, it was certainly straightforward enough. "Dad passed away two years ago. He was on the force. I guess he influenced me a lot. But he spent a lot of time away from home. Guess that's why my mom left us." Logan watched her silently as she paused in thought, then added, "...but that was a long time ago." Her voice seemed to fade out on the last part, as if her thoughts were still somewhere distant.

"How long ya' been a cop?" Logan asked, finding himself becoming genuinely interested.

"Too long is seems," she smiled. "Since I left college actually, joined up after graduation and spent a few years as a beat cop. That's when I learned about gun trafficking the hard way... got shot, lost my partner. It was tough. Decided to work my way into the ATF... maybe I wanted to make up for what happened to Francis, by helping to stop this shit before it could hit our streets. Ya' know?" Cassie explained and Logan nodded.

"What made ya' wanna be a cop in the first place?" he asked, probing a little further.

"Dad." She said with surety. "I used to love hearing his stories about stakeouts and the cases he was on when he'd come home." She grinned, finally looking up at him. "He used to take me down to the station during school vacations, I knew all the cops, and quite a few of the perps, by the time I was fourteen." Cassie smiled again as the memories came flooding back to her. Logan watched her for a moment, thinking to himself how beautiful she was when she'd let her guard down... when she'd show him the woman behind the badge.

"So, how come ya' ain't married?" He finally asked - trying to sound as though he was just curious, but really didn't care personally - although deep down he realized he did care... a little bit anyway.

"Ha!" she exclaimed sharply with a bit of a laugh. "Can you picture me as a housewife?" She asked him, but it was a rhetorical question and Logan didn't make an attempt to respond. He just wanted to hear her out, hear everything she had to say, everything she wanted to tell him... even without words. So he watched her eyes, and her mouth, and her hands - he studied her, to hear what her words didn't say. "Nah, that's not for me. I'm happy just the way I am." She tried to sound

convincing but her words belied the sadness that crossed her expression in a fleeting moment. He knew that being alone was hard as hell... maybe that's why she preferred undercover work. Sometimes it makes the loneliness easier to bear when you convince yourself that it has to be that way - by your own choice - than admitting there's a better way and you just can't get it.

"So then I guess ya' got no plans for a family of yer own, huh? Ya' know, in the future...?"

"I can't see it happening," Cassie replied softly with a shake of her head. "I don't think I'd be able to find a guy who'd ever stick around long enough for that to happen." Logan noted how she tried so hard to sound crass about it, but it really bothered her. He sat quietly, just watching her. Cass sighed heavily as thoughts of Cole flittered through her mind, along with the unceremonial way he'd dumped her with a 'Dear Jane' letter. Coming out of her thoughts she spoke her truth while trying to lighten the mood. "I'm hard to live with," she laughed softly, trying to disguise the twinge of sorrow she felt.

She'd like to have, what she called, a 'regular life', which meant a nine-to-five job, a man, a home, a family. She knew those things would never be hers and Cassie told herself so often that she was passed caring - that she was better off without, that bringing a child into this hateful world would be so unfair. But deep down, the thought of being a mother; of loving another, unconditionally, filled her with a sense of inner peace she so desperately needed.

"Want another beer?" she offered suddenly, trying to change the subject. "We can take them into the living room if you'd prefer. It's a little more comfortable in there."

"Sure, why not."

Cassie grabbed two more bottles from the fridge and headed down the hall. Logan followed her to the living room where she dropped into the comfort of the sofa and Logan took up the armchair that she had occupied earlier. They sat in silence for a long while sipping their beers; the muted TV still lighting the room with its flickering images. But to Cassie it didn't feel awkward in the least, far from it, it felt very relaxing as if they'd done this a thousand times before. She settled back into the seat, pulling her legs up and curling her feet under a cushion.

"So.... where do you go from here, Logan?" she asked and he looked over at her a bit confused. He recovered quickly and adopted his more famous scowl before replying.

"Why? Ya' tryin' ta get rid o' me already?" he asked roughly, but the corner of his mouth turned up as he took a slug of his beer. The little smirk told Cassie that he was playing with her.

"No," she chuckled, "I mean it... what are your plans for the future?" Logan thought about it with a wry expression on his face and then shrugged.

"I dunno... I never really give the future a whole lot of attention. Kinda just take it day to day, ya' know? I mean... who knows if I won't get offed tomorrow, so why make plans for a year from now, ya' know?" He took another swig from the bottle and Cassie watched him seriously. They had a lot in common, she thought. They were both afraid to dream about a future with possibilities that neither of them may ever be granted. She took a deep breath, deciding to try to lighten the mood again.

"I'm sure I could find a place for you at the ATF," she added, ending with a light-hearted laugh as Logan threw her a glaring look before she could finish the sentence. "What..! We could do with someone with your talents." She elucidated with a good-natured shrug, then winked at him with a

smirk as he flashed her another cold stare. She'd managed to twist the conversation back to him with all the skill of a trained interrogator, but she wasn't just fishing anymore, she was genuinely interested.

"Hnh. I'm sure ya' could, but that ain't my style. I work alone." Then he paused, reflecting inwardly. The future had never been in his plans, he'd always lived for today, lived for the moment and whatever that brought him. Usually it brought him trouble in some form or another. Glancing at her as he took a sip from the bottle, Logan wondered wryly what sort of "trouble" Cassie Lathrop would bring him.

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