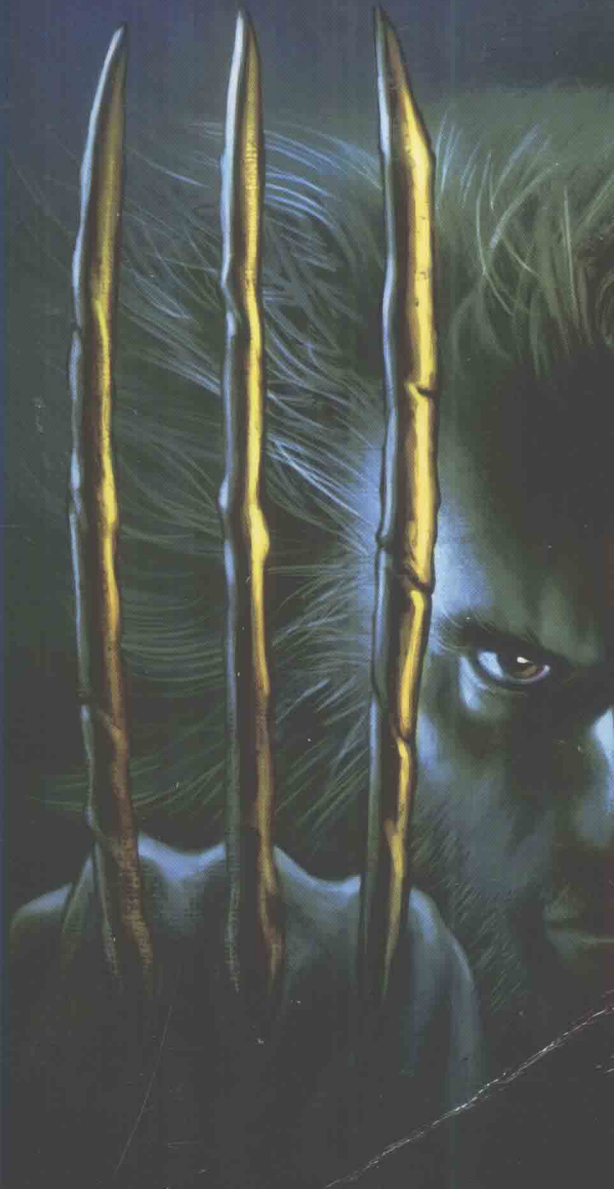


WOLVERINE®

WEAPON X® MARC CERASINI



WOLVERINE®

WEAPON X®

**a novel by
Marc Cerasini**

**based on the
Marvel Comic Book**



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And to mutants everywhere.

1

Prophecy

Rain. Gouging thin canals through soiled windowpanes. Night. Bending from black to phosphorescent green. A sickening hue, like alien pus.

Liquid all around me. But not drowning.

Neon hummed beyond the glass. Twisted tubes. Huge letters spelling out a single word etched in blue-white light: PROPHECY.

The word seemed apocalyptic. No. That isn't right. It was part of the apocalypse. Some drunken bum down the hall had clued him in.

"The apocalypse is coming"—that's what the geezer said. "When all the secrets will be exposed."

No more secrets, no more running.

"Hell is comin' . . ."

That's what he said. He spit when he said it, too. Then the old guy just stopped breathing.

Air. No air here. But breathing still.

It happened a lot at the Prophecy. Old guys. And not so old. Keeling over. Dropping dead.

Trapped inside. Like floating in a coffin. But not dead. Not yet . . .

The water from the sky was as old as the earth. Logan

watched it fall. The same water. Billions of years. Over and over. Fish crawled out of it. Man crawled out of it, too.

Then I crawled out.

Trapped inside. Liquid all around. A vile chemical. But not water . . .

Dinosaurs fed on plants, drank from lakes. This rain was part of those lakes. The wells of villages. Warriors, barbarians, samurai. The water they drank went up and came down. The same water. Trapped in a cycle.

Everything, even the earth, has its limits.

A shock of lightning scratched the night. Logan's eyes shined through the glass—feral-sharp, scanning streets lit by shards of bone-white brilliance.

Another strike, a tree split. The energy sundered it. Like a warning of things to come.

“Storm's comin', and it's a big one. *The big one.* The one I've been looking out for.”

The road. He remembered the road. The cold steered the wheel. Black woods at night. The far north. Endless wilderness. Soon he'd be back. Soon he'd be home.

Beyond the glass now: wet concrete, rusty Dumpsters, graffiti-scarred alleys, haunting tenements, emptiness. They haven't found me. Not yet.

Logan turned from the window, crossed the stained brown carpet. The room was as small as a cage, empty bottles like stalagmites spiking the floor, spiking his brain.

A week-old newspaper ripped under his booted foot, meaningless events. Day after day. He collapsed on a couch, spring-cushioned by a tabloid spread over it. His massive fist tightened, crumpling the newsprint, hurling the ink-black words at the blank TV.

Useless headlines. Day after day after day.

Nearby, a Seagram's bottle, shimmering with many promises. Half-empty. No. Half-full. He poured a healthy swallow into a glass, always grateful.

Ripples of electricity scratched the night.

Searing bolts stab his brain.

Logan winced in shock, retching as a salty trickle rolled down his throat. Then the pain vanished, leaving only the coppery taste of blood—a familiar tang. He touched his throbbing temple, but found no stain. Only beads of salty sweat moistened his fingertips.

He swallowed again, and the metallic sting was gone, too. Were his senses off? Or was the alcohol awakening demons of past mayhem, forgotten violence?

Forgotten . . .

“The apocalypse is here. Time to write home, to make peace with somebody—”

Peace? With whom?

He remembered the saloon, a dozen milling bodies. The usual fog of burning tar. The air had felt frozen. But his muscles, beneath the flannel, had been warm enough. He'd lined up the bottles on the bar in front of him, green pickets. Glass pillars. His fortress.

Time to write home.

“Dear Ma—ya goat-headed, misshapen, walleyed witch. Got some news for ya. The secret is out! Signed: yer son with the hairy paws.”

As if he knew who his mother was. Everybody's got one, right? Or two, maybe. Secrets, that is. Logan had a doozy. A serious mother lode. Hard hiding it sometimes. But he got by.

Another shot of whisky straight from the bottle. But no oblivion. Not even a rush, until he noted its absence.

Then the sensation arrived as if he'd conjured it. He sucked his cigar.

Gagging. Tissue rips. A ravaged throat.

Maybe the apocalypse has already begun.

This place where he was hiding, this Prophecy, it was a tenement transformed by the faithful into a refuge for fallen Christians. He'd been a Christian once, a long time ago. He still remembered enough of the lingo to lie his way through the door. It was a dump, of course. But it was free—for the fallen. So he'd qualified.

Warm whisky dribbled past Logan's wiry, raven-black chin stubble, onto his sweat-stained T-shirt.

Choking. Then a voice. But who?

"Enough of the stuff to stun an elephant . . ."

Alcohol alters the flow of electrolyte ions through brain cells. He remembered reading that somewhere—part of his black ops training, maybe. Whisky slows the speed at which neurons fire.

"But I'm not drunk. And I want to be . . . I need to be . . ."

Alcohol suppresses the production of a hormone that keeps the body's fluid reserves in balance. Without that hormone, kidneys begin to steal water from other organs . . .

"Steal water?"

The storm continued to rage, intensifying.

The rain continued to pound on the windows.

Liquid all around. But not drowning.

The brain shrinks as a result.

Logan snatched the bottle again and spilled the dregs into the bottom of his glass. But he paused before shooting it back. Cradling the drink in his heavy fist, Logan slumped into the battered couch.

Violent images flowed over him. A dispute he'd had with a nickel-and-dime crime boss. The idiotic bravado.

"Stupid. He should have known better . . ."

It happened after he'd become an outcast again. This time he'd been booted from a secret branch of the Canadian Intelligence Service. The infraction had been trivial compared to the heinous acts he'd performed in the line of duty. But Logan sensed his peers were happy to rid themselves of the enigma in their midst.

Secrets. I had plenty. More than any man should bear.

Not long after, Logan found work. His reputation became a two-edged sword. An unending line of young punks or fading old-timers always there to challenge him. But that meant jobs were easy to come by.

This time around, it had been Logan's "associates" who'd executed the double cross.

That day, Logan recalled, had gotten off to a bad start. He resented the trip to the gunrunner's garage to collect his cut of the profits. But when he saw the sneer on St. Exeter's face, Logan knew things were about to get much worse.

The gunrunner leaned against a crate of fragmentation grenades, his cashmere sweater, Prada pants, and Gucci loafers incongruous in the junkyard setting.

"I didn't think you'd have the guts to show up here, Logan. Not after your connection failed to deliver the goods."

St. Exeter pushed back his hair with a delicate, manicured hand.

Logan met the man's cool gaze. "You're spewing crap, René. I know for a fact that those air-to-airs are already in the pipeline to your 'clients' in Latin America."

"Perhaps. But the weapons were of . . . inferior quality."

"The Pentagon would be surprised to learn that, considering they were all state-of-the-art Stinger missiles."

As Logan spoke, two of St. Exeter's bodyguards entered the garage behind him. Two more, in greasy coveralls, climbed out of a repair pit to flank him.

Half smile in place, René stared at Logan with eyes like black empty holes.

"You're not gonna pay," said Logan. It was not a question.

Suddenly, the grease monkey on Logan's left pulled a wrench out of his stained coveralls.

Stupid.

Logan hit the man with enough force to drive his jawbone into his brain. A grunt, and the mechanic crumpled. Logan snatched the tool from his dead hand before the man struck the ground.

Dodging a bullet fired at point-blank range, Logan spun and hurled the wrench at the man who'd pulled the trigger.

A crunch of bone, a splash of red, and the shooter's head jerked back. As he fell, his Magnum dropped at Logan's feet.

Logan ducked a wild shot, then snapped up the weapon. He fired without aiming—a lucky shot. The bullet clipped the second bodyguard's throat. Gurgling, he fell to his knees, clutching at his neck in a widening pool on the concrete floor.

Finally, Logan's luck ran out. The last of René's bodyguards charged, in an attempt to push Logan into the repair pit. The pair fell in together.

At the bottom of the deep concrete well, both scram-

bled to their feet. A shadow fell over them. Logan looked up in time to see St. Exeter toss an object into the hole.

"Catch, *mon ami*."

Logan snatched the grenade out of the air. When the bodyguard saw it, he lunged for the ladder.

"Where you goin'?" Logan grabbed the man by his collar, spun him around, and jammed the grenade into his gut.

Wheezing, the bodyguard folded around the explosive and Logan released it, then dove for the opposite end of the pit. Heat and gore washed over Logan as the muffled blast slammed him against the concrete wall.

Bleeding from a patchwork of wounds, Logan crawled out of the pit that had become the bodyguard's grave, only to discover that René St. Exeter had fled the scene.

Logan caught up with him a few days later, on a public street in the heart of Montreal. The final confrontation occurred amid a dozen gawking witnesses, but Logan didn't care.

Some things, like payback, were too damn important to delay.

Even after the rage had passed, Logan felt no regret—only anger that he was forced to move on. Later that same night, he planned to hop a freight. His destination: the Yukon. As far north as Logan could go, to the very edge of civilization. He'd leave behind everything—a Lotus-Seven, some worthless possessions, his past.

With a bit of luck, Logan could start over.

Start over?

"Good place to start over, eh?"

The voice—familiar—came from years past. Back when Logan was still with the Defense Ministry. Back when he operated out of the Ottawa branch of the CIS.

Logan had been hunched in a corner, honing his

blade, when the stranger approached. He'd looked up long enough to see past the big man's proffered hand, to the name tag tacked onto his broad chest: N. Langram.

The screech of metal on tortured metal resumed as Logan sharpened the edge of his K-bar knife.

The sandy-haired man reluctantly withdrew his hand, then *slumped down on a weight bench across from Logan's.*

The training area was empty but for them. Minutes before, they'd been told that their training had ended, that their first assignment was at hand.

"I think it's a great place to begin again . . . the CIS, I mean," continued N. Langram. "I've been to a lot of places, done a lot of things, legal and illegal, and I'm happy to forget my past and bury it forever."

Langram slapped his knees. "To my surprise, after all my mischief, the Defense Ministry and the CIS decided to let bygones be bygones and offer me a second chance."

"Good for you," said Logan.

"I figure they've done the same for you, eh?"

Logan fingered the tip of the blade. A drop of blood dewed his fingertip. He tasted it.

"My name's Langram . . . friends call me Neil." This time, the man didn't offer his hand.

"Logan."

"Quiet one, eh?"

Logan spun the knife and plunged it into the scabbard. Then he crossed his arms and stared into the distance.

"I've been wondering why they paired us. You and me. We're strangers and we've never even trained together. So I'm trying to figure out the angles . . ."

"What have you deduced, Langram?"

Missing Logan's sarcasm, Langram tried to answer the question.

"Odd parameters for this mission, don't you think?" he began. "I mean, why not a simple HALO jump? The CDM has hundreds of soldiers who've trained for High Altitude Low Opening insertions, and hundreds more qualified for reconnaissance infiltration of hostile territory. Which means they don't need either of us. We'd be considered overqualified for this mission, except that the men in charge decided to do a few things the hard way."

"Like?"

"You have to admit that there aren't too many operatives in the CIS—or even the CDM—who are proficient in the use of the HAWK harness," said Langram.

The HAWK, or High Altitude Wing Kite, was a specialized piece of "personal aerodynamic hardware" developed for use by the Strategic Hazard Intervention Espionage Logistics Division—and SHIELD didn't give lessons on how to use their high-tech flying suits to just any soldier.

"Maybe the top brass thinks the HAWK is the best means of insertion," said Logan. "With a HAWK we can control our own speed and angle of descent, and when and where we land. And we can fight back—even while we're airborne—if it becomes necessary."

Langram nodded, conceding Logan's points. "I know all that. I've used the HAWK before. And so, apparently, have you, Mr. Logan."

"Your point?"

"Maybe you and I crawled through the same mud," said Langram. "Or maybe we just have some of the same friends . . . and enemies."

Logan sat in silence.

"Secretive one, too, eh?"

Secrets. I've got plenty. Too many for me to handle sometimes.

"That's okay, Logan. I won't pry."

"You already have."

Langram refused to take offense, and they sat in uneasy silence for what seemed like a long time.

"I know the geography pretty well," Langram said at last. "The Korean Peninsula, I mean. And the area where we're going, too."

"Nice place?"

"If North Korea is a prison, then the region around Sook Reservoir is solitary confinement, a cell on death row, and the gallows all rolled up into one ugly bastard of a package."

Logan shrugged. "Sounds delightful."

Langram studied the other man. Logan avoided his gaze.

"So that's my expertise," Langram said. "And since you don't appear to be a nuclear weapons specialist, I figure you know either the local lingo or something about the guys we're chasing."

"Right so far."

"And since you are very skilled with a blade, and you ain't Korean, I have to assume you know plenty about Hideki Musaki and all his Yakuza thugs, and about the weapons-grade plutonium they hijacked on its way to that top secret government laboratory up north—the one processing weapons of terror."

Logan nodded once. "I know Hideki Musaki . . . personally. But we're not tight."

Langram smiled for the first time since their meeting. "So you've wandered the Far East, eh? Somehow I knew

it. Seeing you reminded me of a place . . . a dive called Cracklin' Rosa's. And a man, too. A fellow known in those parts as Patch. He had a proclivity for the blade . . . just like you."

Again, Logan did not reply.

Langram glanced at his watch, then stood.

"Got to go, Logan," he said. "But we'll be seeing each other a lot in the coming days. In the meantime, remember what I said about the CIS being a good place to start over. To ditch your past if you want to . . . not many get a second chance."

Langram turned to go.

"Hey, Langram."

This time, Logan was on his feet and facing him.

"I'll watch your back if you'll watch mine. And when this mission's over, if we're both still alive, I'll buy you a drink . . ."

Another drink. And another. But never enough to bring release. Wait. What was I thinking about?

Like wisps of mist, the memories of that first meeting with Neil Langram slipped away.

Reduced by a creeping amnesia to dazedly pondering the drink in his hand, Logan watched as the whisky morphed from clear brown to cloudy green.

Nauseated, he looked away.

On the other side of the window, the word PROPHECY glowed with ghastly phosphorescence. An acrid, chemical stench assailed his nostrils, and battered couch springs dug into his flesh. But despite his physical discomfort, Logan's head lolled and his eyes closed.

Sleep came, but Logan's dreams were no different than his waking life. He longed for escape while he continued to run, his legs pumping on a perpetual incline,

stretching farther and farther into the future. At the top was the humming neon of the Prophecy sign, waiting there, waiting for him.

Suddenly awake, Logan bolted upright, crushing the glass in his grip. Thick red blood pooled in his palm, but he felt no pain.

Logan staggered to his feet, impatient now to flee, to escape before the apocalypse swallowed him up.

He tugged the flannel shirt over his wide shoulders. He pondered the predictability of his nightmares. Visions of pain and bones and spikes. Of vile stench and horror. And of dagger hands . . .

Searching for the keys to his car, Logan rummaged through a pile of yellowing newspapers. He noticed a headline on a grease-stained tabloid:

MERCY KILLER "QUACK" ELUDES FBI.

Under the headline, next to the story, a grainy black-and-white image. The photograph of a portly, bearded man with a bland, unremarkable face.

The picture and the headline vaguely troubled Logan, but he didn't know why. When he tried to snatch the memory threads to connect them, they dissolved like streams of vapor in his increasingly clouded mind.

Lightning cracked the sky, split another tree.

Another warning.

Storm's comin', and it's a big one. The big one. The one I've been looking out for.

Logan pocketed his money and his keys. He left the Prophecy without a backward glance. His last memory: the neon sign blinking steadily in the rain.

Suddenly, Logan was sitting on a bar stool, hunched over a stained counter of a dingy gin mill. Outside,

through filthy plate glass, the rain had stopped. A blanket of dirty snow covered the broken streets and sidewalks.

When did it snow?

Hands shaking, Logan reached for the bottle at his arm. He swallowed, wondering if all the booze had finally caught up with him and induced some kind of mental blackout.

Logan had no memory of the drive, yet through the big window he could see his Lotus-Seven parked in the lot.

Did he drive through rain, then snow? Had hours passed? Or days? Had he missed the freight train . . . and with it his only chance to escape?

For the first time in Logan's memory, panic welled up inside of him. Another swallow of whisky took care of it, but left confusion in its wake.

Logan regained a certain measure of control by observing his surroundings—the bartender calmly washing glasses while watching a muted television tuned to a soccer game. Another man seated at the opposite end of the bar, drinking quietly. Logan sniffed the air, and his nose curled at the smell of rank booze and stale tobacco.

Tubes like worms. Boring their way into his ears, nose, his mouth, his brain.

Outside, a lone traffic signal switched from green to yellow to red and back again. There were no pedestrians on the sidewalks, and the clock on the snow-covered steeple down the block was running backward.

We travel into the future every second we live, but no one can go back in time, according to Einstein. Which proved the old geezer wasn't so smart after all.

In the shadows, under the dartboard, Logan spied three