

OF SHAPE SHIFTERS AND SPIES by D. Davis {Rated PG-13}

Synopsis: A lucky break provides key information that Logan needs to track down a mortal enemy, but first he must do the groundwork to lay the trap.

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“Logan.” Scott’s voice filters from his office. His voice and scent tells me he’s not happy.

I lean against the door frame. “Yeah.”

“Do we have a plan?”

I shrug. We do not have a plan. I do, but it won’t make it past the first briefing.

The frown on his face says he’s in fearless-leader mode and my evasive reply doesn’t sit well, if the grinding of his jaw is any clue.

“Careful Cyke, you’ll crack a filling.”

He doesn’t engage. “Sit down. You need to see this.”

That smacks too much of an order, so I prop on the edge of his desk, cross my arms and blast my best drop-dead expression. He sneers and rotates his computer screen. It’s lit up with a list of names. Three names, Malcolm Colcord, L.P. Diebel, Stanislav Ruchinsky hit me like a hollow point bullet between the eyes.

“What is this?”

“The real controlling entities behind Genesys.”

Takes me a second to link Genesys. I feel a cold knot in my gut and slam my fist against the desk. “How’d ya dig this up?”

“By sitting down and doing actual research, one of the many skills you consistently seem to lack.”

Whatcha gonna do, stick me in a corner and chuck a dunce cap on my noggin? I’m tempted to tell him where to stuff it, but my brain’s revving through its gears as the raceway throws another curve my way.

I groan out loud. My gut kept tellin’ me this is a trap. “You thinkin’ what I’m thinkin’, Cyke?”

“Lock down?” He rakes a hand through his hair and stares at the floor. Don’t take any skill at all to know this is a decision neither of us makes easily.

“Yeah,” he exhales. The odor of his frustration is pungent as Listerine. Let’s alert the Professor.”

xXx

Briefing Charles went just like I figured---agree to disagree on tactical implementation, but he stays mostly out of my way. The silver lining, if ya can call it that, is Cyke’s with me.

I’m in underground main security resetting and testing system parameters for the lock down when Kitty Pryde chirps, “Hey, somebody’s using an unauthorized cell phone.”

I’m a step ahead of Scott fronting Kitty’s computer screen. I growl, “Whose number?” all set to rip an offending teenager a new one for breaking procedure.

Kitty, our resident budding computer genius, clicks a few keys. “Not ours.”

“Doctor Jennings or Wendy?” Scott’s suggests, about to get lockjaw with irritation.

“Better not be, unless some moron didn’t log ‘em before the welcome mat got rolled out.”

“No point hitting the panic button yet.” Scott seems too smug for my liking. “This system’s pretty sensitive. It could be a skip signal from anybody anywhere.”

“Kid, find out whose number it is? And can you pinpoint where it’s coming from?”

Takes her all of ninety seconds. “Registered as unlisted.”

Figures. I crack my neck to ease frustration.

She adds, “I’m triangulating the location.” We’re both hanging over her shoulder, watching her fingers fly over the keyboard as a grid forms up on the screen.

Her fingers freeze. “Oh no!”

Oh no? More like, oh, crud. The call’s disconnected before she gets a fix on it.

“It’s coming from somewhere in the county,” she offers sheepishly just as the alert tone for perimeter security sounds. A drone followed by six chirps says something’s trying to breach sector six or the thing’s on the fritz again.

Ten minutes later, I park my truck near the supposed security breach. Nothing’s obvious, but the cover of night doesn’t help. Rolling down the window, I cut the engine and let my senses roam. There’s no ear-fragging repeller beam whine, so six is hosed. Flash light in hand, time for a walkabout, see if I can fix it from here.

What’s up with this? A set of tracks. Canine. Kneeling, I inhale the scent. Well, gee, canine for sure. Domestic. To be specific, a familiar, very large Newfoundland breed whose name is going to be mud, if I don’t turn him into the pound first.

I let out a whistle. “C’mon Bear.”

The trail leads to the sectors power boosting station. Whoa! What’s this? The tracks change. Human, small, almost kid-sized.

What the heck! Somebody steal my dog? The scents are fresh, no more than an hour old, though I don’t recognize the human scent. It’s mutant for sure, male and adult.

A control panel mounted on a steel post is wide open. This isn’t a good sign. Missing dog aside, an unknown jimmed with security and waltzed on and off campus undetected. No leap guessing a connection to the untraceable cell phone.

“Cyke,” I call into my comm unit.

“Copy,” crackles in my earpiece.

“Any luck on the trace?”

“Affirmative. Just after you left Kit recaptured the signal.”

“Almost got it,” Kitty’s voice pipes through.

“Definitely had a bogey. Shut down this sector,” I report. “Anything on the other sectors?”

“Hey guys,” Kitty transmits, “that call is still happening and it’s within less than a mile of campus.”

I just shake my head. Less than a mile---which way? “Kid, I need better ‘n that.”

“For crap sake, Logan! I’m doing the best I can,” is ear drum popping static in my ear.

“Negative on the other sectors,” Cyke replies. “But we’re checking manually. You need back up?”

“Negative. Got some tracks worth checkin’.”

“Logan, procedure says you’re supposed to go in pairs.”

Forget waiting on a babysitter. “You’re breaking up Cyke. Over and out.”

I catch, “Dang it, Logan, you know...” as I switch off.

Yada, yada, yada. Deal with it, Cyke.

Something's screwy. There're more than half dozen footprints and the tracks and scent are Bear's again. No overlap or paralleling. First it's dog, then human, then dog. Ah, man! If that dog's...

A stray shows up just as the kid and her mom take refuge and shape shifters can't transform into things much larger or smaller than their natural form. So, yeah, a hundred and fifty pound Newfoundland. Slap me a good 'un! It adds up.

The tracks go on for quite a ways, leading me through rolling terrain. Tall pines and thick underbrush provide ample cover. The air is heavy with the scent of big water, Titicus Reservoir. Xavier's estate butts against the north side of the watershed. It's a beautiful tract of land with lots of places to lose yourself. I know, I've hidden out here myself, when civilization yanks the leash too tight.

Clouds roll in, dimming the moonlight. Makes it kind of tough keeping visual on the tracks, even for me, but I can't risk the flashlight. Luckily, the scent's stronger. Cresting a low ridge, I hit pay dirt. Snippets of a man's voice, accented British, rides the breeze.

Crouching, I go still and scan. There he is, blabbing on a cell phone. Animal stealth gets me spitting-distance close. My blood runs hot and cold, a mix of rage and dread, hearing him reveal intimate details only an insider knows. I'm being made and everybody I care about is being reamed! And I bloody well never saw it coming.

He's wearing what looks like a skin tight body suit, slick and gray, kind of like an Olympic speed-skater's get-up. Guess Mystique-blue ain't the only color his kind comes in. He's short, no taller than Susie, but he's lean muscled. Yeah, weighs about one-fifty.

And...oh, no! This cinches it. Bear's bandana is knotted around his neck. The dog's a shape shifter? Make that MY dog is a shape shifter? And I thought Mystique was good. He's so busy spilling his guts, he's got no clue I'm here.

"Aye, I know my opinion means squat all, but like I told ya before, the Wolverine's wench is well up the duff."

I swallow a growl. It's bad enough he's outted me, but this blabbing personal stuff about my wife, Wendy, Matt makes my blood boil.

A car roars past, its headlights casting a broken beam through the trees before disappearing into the night. He clams up, goes small, glances nervously. "No worries. Just a car...Right...Snatch the li'l buggers?... Naff off, Ruchinsky! Get yourself another barmy tosser to pull off a stunt like that."

I curse silently. Rage twists my gut. Cold realization turns to molten hate. The blood lust's so potent it takes all my power to control it. In the seconds he takes to stow the phone in a hollowed out tree, I'm right behind him with my claws pressed into the small of his back. "You're gonna die, you sack o'filth!"

He doesn't twitch, not a breath. "No, I'm not. I've got info you want." Sounds cocky, but stinks of scared.

"Uh, huh. But you're still dead." To prove my point, I poke him deep enough to bleed, to hurt. "Only thing ya gotta choose is ya gonna tell me quick and die quick or do I carve it outta ya piece by piece."

His pulse shoots through the roof and cold night or not, he's sweating buckets. "Generous choice, mate."

"Yeah, they tell me I'm all heart."

I smell gun oil and warn, “Don’t even think about it, bub!” Not keen to get flipped on my butt reaching for the piece, I order, “Move right, slow and easy.”

He shuffles sideways. A fresh adrenalin dump says he priming for action, but his options are limited. “Grrraarrhh!” declares his choice.

I jab for his spine, but he’s fast and flexible, dodging instant paralysis in a forward, twisting motion. He morphs into a hundred and fifty pounds of claws, fangs and fur — a big mother of a mountain lion and explodes into a ball of rage, making a kamikaze dive toward my claws.

No way. You don’t die ‘til I say. Snackt! Back goes the hardware. Holy whoa! The fur ball sails clear over my head. My Hail-Mary tackle is way too late and I plow snow.

He hits the ground, hauling tail for dense underbrush. Close enough on his six, I deploy the claws and hack a path easy as mowing grass. From the stress hormones he’s throwing off, it won’t take long for him to run out of gas. Unless he’s got a juiced up endocrine system like me? Not a problem either way, because the bugger cuts a noisy trail through the brush a blind man could follow. Fatigued and wheezing, his breath steams around his head. Closing in, I almost snag his tail and he knows it.

Smart bugger heads for the water. My luck he morphs into a big toothed shark. Peachy! Wrestling match with Jaws himself. Forget that! I lunge, but he veers left, the scent of raw panic trails like a fart. I bellow, “Grrraagghh!” but end up clutching a handful of nothing.

The terrain clears and slopes downhill. I regain the distance lost with the failed lunge, but the cat takes a steep berm in one leap. Scrabbling desperately for a foothold, I eat dirt in his wake. Cresting the mound, muscles tensed for another tackle, I spring and---something registers in the rear end of my brain. A beam of light bounces off the roadbed below, a mechanical purr interrupted by gears shifting, an indistinct sense of motion at the farthest reach of my peripheral vision.

“Whoa!” Forward momentum of three hundred pounds of muscle and adamantium is tough to stop. Arching backwards, fighting for balance I manage it — barely. Loose rock and dirt rain on the road below.

He doesn’t stop. Leaping, he executes a spectacular arc. I watch him twist, desperate to avoid a couple tons of motorized metal. Shrieking brakes and skidding tires doesn’t dilute his agonized howl or the meaty thud of him kissing a pick up trucks hood.

I crouch and watch the truck driver wrench open the door. I smell his terror change from confusion to outrage as he realizes a wild animal’s just trashed the front of his truck. New truck judging by the cardboard temporary tag stuck on his rear window. Cussing, he runs his hand over the dent in the hood then climbs back into the cab. For a second I think he’s gonna run the mountain lion over, but he turns the wheel hard left and roars off.

Lying in a twisted, mangled heap, the shape shifters not dead, but he’s in a bad way. He doesn’t know it, but he got off lucky compared to what I was going to do.

I witness his form waver then revert to a man. His time’s of the essence if I’m gonna get anything useful out of him. Activating my comm, I got no use for preliminaries. “Cyke, you copy? I got a casualty.” Concurrent to Summers’ terse, “Acknowledged,” I feel something like a rotor-tiller plowing through my mind and, as much as I hate psi intrusion, it’s a time saver par excellence.

Charles understands my aversion. Without missing a beat, he switches to verbal communication. “Understood. Give me five minutes to locate your coordinates with Cerebro. I’ll

relay the information to Kurt. And Logan, rest assured our guest will be well and properly cared for.”

Genteel words, ruthless tone! C’mon Chuck, just say it: Things are messed up and you’re mad as hell.

xXx

I smell it before I hear it. Bamf! From out of nowhere Kurt materializes. His yellow eyes go wide at the sight of the shape shifter's motionless form. “He is dead, ja?”

No pal, he digs moon tans on asphalt. I shake my head. “This is, was, our sector breach. Chased him this far and he dove off there.” I point to the berm, hardly visible in the darkness. “I need ya to ‘port him to a detention cell-”

“Nien!” Kurt cuts me off. “I cannot teleport into a detention cell. They are bamffen proof. But the Professor and Doctor McCoy are prepared.”

xXx

Takes me a little over forty minutes to hike back to my truck and drive to the main building. Singularly focused, I don’t heed Charles’ telepathic meddling and I don’t break stride making for the nearest elevator descending to the sub-levels.

Hank looks up from his computer screen.”Can’t say I didn’t expect you sooner.”

Intent to get past Hank and into the isolation cell behind him, a grunt is my only answer.

Quick on his feet, he stands four-square blocking my way and lays a heavy hand on my shoulder.

Hackles raised, I snarl, “Git yer hands off, bub.”

He doesn’t retreat. “Telepathic I am not, but something tells me you’re not on a social call.”

What was your first clue? “Get outta my way.”

“I can’t do that, my friend.”

Sure ya can and I’ll show ya how. Palms flat, I shove against his chest. “Last chance, Hank. Move.”

“I think not.” He sounds civil, but lip curled, muscles tense and straining under his starched dress shirt says different.

I rear back, fist balled to deliver a lighting upper-cut. A hair faster, Hank blocks and seizes my hand as another furry mitt of his clamps down at the juncture between my neck and shoulder.

“Interrogation will do you no good.”

Says who? Ol’ Blue isn’t backin’ down. Neither am I and emphasize it with a thunderous, *I’m-gonna-chop-ya-up-into-chum* growl.

Hank ups the pressure. “Will you kindly listen to reason.”

Son of a gun! Carotid artery crimped, specks of light float across my eyes. My heartbeat booms like a kettle drum inside my skull. Survival instinct seizing control, I become a high voltage adrenalin conduit. Hank’s about to get his hairy, blue butt fried.

Fisting in his face, claws primed, my knuckles turn metal blue. “Last chance, McCoy.”

He doesn’t bat an eye. “You’re better than this.”

No I’m not, but what am I doing? Last time I checked Hank McCoy ranked as a friend. I stand down and snort. “This better be good.”

Releasing, he raises both hands in a gesture of neutrality. “It’s not good, but it’s the truth.”

“Spit it out.”

“The shape shifter suffers amnesia.”

My laugh is saturated with irony. “Well, stuff that, Blue.”

This time I do pop the claws. “I guaran-damn-tee ya, he’ll remember real fast.” Underscoring the point, I thrust them toward his cell.

Hank’s eyes blaze. “You’re letting emotion obscure judgment. Do you not think Charles has thoroughly examined the man? For the love of all that is reasonable, Mister Jones’ activities have jeopardized the entire school. Charles, all of us are as motivated as you in eliminating any threat.”

He’s right. “Graagghh!” Frustration boils over. I drive my fist into his desk, retracting the claws at the last possible moment.

Hank raises his thick brows, glances at the fresh dent on his work station then meets my eyes. “Thank you, I think.”

Furious and frustrated, I pace and curse. I need to think, re-group. Good man and friend that he is, Hank sticks his nose back into his computer to give me space I need.

After I’ve blown off steam, he clears his throat. “There’s a briefing at seven tomorrow morning. Get a good night’s rest and we’ll consolidate strategies then.”

xXx

Good nights’ rest? Sure thing. So, why I am I standing under a scalding shower shivering, sick to my stomach and fighting an urge to rip everything to shreds?

Nightmares, that’s why. The agony, the horror of molten metal fused to my bones. If that isn’t enough, the impotence and the guilt I feel, because I can’t protect the people I love is eating me up. It drives the feral beast inside to rage. It makes me want to scream, to sink my claws, knuckle deep, into the bellies of the son’s o’ guns responsible for making me into a paranoid, psycho killing-machine and rip ‘em inside out. Got to push the demons back where they came from, lock down the animal, get control before I do something stupid.

“Grrraahh!” Jagged cracks form in the marble wall around the dent left by my fist, but the vivid specter won’t let go. I feel like a worthless coward. Closing my eyes, I lean against the wall willing my enervation down the drain along with the soap and water.

Hot spray turns cold. I yelp and my emotions flip a one-eighty. Dang it, I’m not helpless and I’m not waiting for any meeting with Charles or anybody.

It takes me all of five minutes to dry off, dress and make my way to the underground communications center. Early hour that it is, the system’s on auto and I’m alone. Job one is getting a lock on Ruchinsky.

Everybody thinks I’m computer illiterate. Think again, kiddies. Takes me a couple minutes to locate and bring up data on Kitty’s cell phone trace.

Our set-up’s as good as the FBI, though not quite as good as SHIELD’s. I’ll have to settle for bulls-eyeing Ruchinsky from three meters instead of the wart on his nose. The New York City grid overlay shows he’s holed up at Trump’s Soho. Tightening parameters shows me approximately what floor and room. Even better is a detailed floor plan of individual rooms on the hotel’s website. This is almost too easy.

Comings and goings in corridors are probably monitored, but I bet somebody around here knows how to hack those videos. Forget it, takes too long. Maybe I’ll just pay me a visit. Sniff him out myself – if he’s still there.

The seed of a plan forms, but I got to do the groundwork. Can I-?

It's early, but too bad. I buzz the phone in Kitty's room. Takes four rings before I hear her yawn and mumble, "Mmm. What?"

"Kid, can we keep a lock on Ruchinsky's cell phone?"

"What? Who is this?" I hear rustling. "For crap sake Logan, it's the middle of the night."

"Nope, it's officially mornin'. C'mon kid, I need t'know."

I hear more rustling and groaning. "Where are you?"

"The comm."

"Fine. Hold onto your britches. I'll be down in five."

"Make it two."

"Five, Logan. I gotta pee." She bangs the phone down in my ear.

It takes her more than ten minutes, but the mug of steaming coffee she offers puts me in a forgiving mood. That, and how can anybody stay ticked off at a five-foot-nothing imp in rumpled pink and green sweats, fuzzy slippers and tangled bed hair?

I let her elbow me out of the way. "Now, what is it you're asking?"

"Can I track Ruchinsky's movements in real-time?"

"When he uses his cell phone? Yeah, we're doing it, but there are limits."

"Limits?"

"Like if he goes out of the area, it's going to be harder. And, of course, if he doesn't make any calls."

"Has he made any since last night?"

I watch her like a hawk, memorizing what she does to pull up the data: Two calls. One brief, the other clocked in at fifteen minutes.

"They're still coming from the same place?"

She yawns. "Uh huh."

"How do we find out who he called?"

"We can't."

"Why not?"

"Because all we can do is track when he's using the phone. With the technology we have, there's no telling whether it's an outbound or inbound call."

Figures. "Ok, kiddo. Thanks. Hey, umm, can ya send the data from here to my comm?"

Sometimes I do appreciate Summers' anal retentiveness insisting the Team have the latest and greatest in gizmos. "Can I get auto-updates?"

"For sure. I'll set it up like a text message."

Squeezing her shoulder, I say, "You're the best. And keep this between us, eh?"

Grin turns to soft scowl as she nods once.

"I'm putting ya on the spot, eh?"

"No. No, it's okay." Her voice and scent betray the truth.

"Tell ya what. Just show me how to do it."

xXx

"Whoa! Crap." It's a nice save, my coffee from trashing the comm console hearing, *Logan*, forgive the intrusion. Please come to my quarters, inside my head.

"Dang it, Chuck. Warn a guy next time."

Kitty glares at me like I'm a retard or something.

“Boss man wants me,” I explain rubbing the back of my neck. Durn psi stuff gives me a headache. *Kinda busy here, Charles, I think in return.*

Understood, however, this is urgent.

On my way. “We done here kid?”

“Sure Logan. I’ll test the link. Be ready when you’re done with the Professor.”

Charles’ quarters, eh? Strange. Been here two years and don’t think I’ve set foot in the place twice. Even then, it’s been only as far as his lounge.

The doors of his private elevator swish open and I’m definitely surprised to see Scott. Slumped into an over-stuffed couch, sucking coffee. He looks like he either just woke up or pulled an all-nighter. Same with Charles, though even wearing a--what is he’s wearing? A sweat suit made out of silk? Whatever it is, his posture and scent, propped sideways in his hover chair says rough night. Sleepless nights seem to be a trend around here lately.

“Good morning.” Charles’ voice matches the fatigue on his face. He points toward a table near the window. “Help yourself.”

“What’s up?” I ask, shoving a croissant in my mouth and tapping the samovar for a second cup o’joe.

“I’m sure you’ll agree yesterday’s revelations marked a serious escalation in the situation with Wendy. As such, I deemed it necessary to question the girls’ mother in greater detail.”

About time. “And?” I slide into a seat next to the buffet and stuff a strip of bacon in my face.

“Doctor Jennings permitted me to probe her mind for anything that might be of value locating Ruchinsky or anyone else involved.”

“Thought she could block ya.”

“Very few can completely block me, Logan.”

“Right.” I don’t conceal a smirk. “Go on.”

“I am thoroughly satisfied that she was unaware of Ruchinsky’s and Diebel’s affiliation with Genesys. When presented with the evidence, she was visibly distressed.”

“I thought she was going to faint,” Scott adds

Charles nods. “Our mind-link revealed very little of value, though she did confirm and update other key information pertaining to Scott’s discovery. Through process of elimination, she has pointed us toward a few possible leads to Ruchinsky and perhaps Diebel.”

“Sure and we’re just gonna go talk real nice to ‘em and, bingo, they’ll tell us everything we wanna know.”

“Not exactly.” It’s Scott again. “Marla took me on an after-hours tour of Genesys’ local offices.”

“No joke!”

“Uh huh.” Scott pauses, refilling his coffee cup. Charles declines a gesture for a refill. “I loaded undetectable spy-ware into their main server, tapped the phone system and linked us to their surveillance and security network.”

Good place to start, but no guarantees the big fish swim by that particular puddle.

“Agreed,” Charles answers my unspoken criticism. “Which leads me to our next possible lead. Of course, you’re aware of Mister Jones’ condition.”

“Yeah.” I massage my knuckles thinking my special brand of persuasion might jog his memory.

“Henry and I spent several hours with him last night. We believe he will recover. However, the timetable and extent of his recovery is uncertain.”

“Get to the point.”

“In good time, Logan. Considering what we do know, I feel it is prudent to lose no time formulating a viable plan.”

“Hold up a minute. I seem to remember you saying you didn’t want the Team getting down and dirty.”

I said I would not condone or personally facilitate needless violence or lethal force. Let’s not waste time splitting hairs over semantics.”

I’m not the one trying to jaw the bad guys to death.

Guess he hears me. Clearing his throat, Charles beams a sour look my way. “My sources at the FBI and Homeland Security have very little on Jones. Mutant Affairs...”

It’s a toss-up whether Scott or I snort the loudest over his mentioning Mutant Affairs and Charles’ expression says he concurs.

Charles continues, “...begrudgingly confirms he is a freelancer with no official ties to any organization. He has not been linked to mercenary activity, nothing violent. He is simply an informant whose primary motivation seems to be financial.”

Reading between the lines, the shape-shifter has spooked for Mutant Affairs. Probably won’t work for the FBI or Homeland Security, because they don’t have deep pockets. “Where’s this going?”

“To a suggestion that was made and rejected the other day.”

“Dammit Charles, get to the point.”

“The point is, after the FBI, Homeland Security and Mutant Affairs declined my request for assistance,” *and to support whatever it is you’re covertly planning*, he beams into my mind, “I contacted Colonel Fury. He will be joining us in a teleconference shortly.”

Don’t you mean control? “You’re serious?”

“Quite serious.” *Controlling you is akin to influencing the tide.*

You’re learning, ol’ man.

xXx

Nick Fury’s an imposing figure and no less so on Charles’ sixty-something inch flat-screen monitor. He greets, “How do, gents,” and the smoke ring he blows from his cigar gives me a craving.

Don’t even consider it, Charles beams into my mind as I pat my pockets in search.

“Logan, old man, all things considered, you’re looking fit.” He winks with his uncovered eye.

“Nice touch with the eye patch.”

“Kiss my...”

Charles cuts, “Ahem!” over my invective and Fury’s mirth. “Shall we begin?”

Flicking ashes into a heaped ashtray, Fury’s grin turns straight faced. “Fire away, Xavier.”

Thirty minutes later, we get about as far with Fury and SHIELD as I figured on. He spills everything he knows about Jones, including confirmation he’d done a few jobs for SHIELD. He won’t take the creep off our hands. He’s got intelligence on Weapons Plus, but won’t detail it via tele-conference. SHIELD won’t get directly involved, but they will provide technical assistance tracking down Ruchinsky, Diebel and whoever else might be hooked up with a revived Weapons Plus.

SHIELD’s price for these morsels? If you have to ask you can’t afford it.

xXx

“Ow! Ouch!” The nicks close up quick as a blink. Don’t like doing it and it won’t last long, but gotta shave the chops as part of my disguise. A handyman’s uniform procured through questionable means from the hotel’s maintenance department completes it.

Nick came through on the devices I need to track Ruchinsky. A little homework on my end revealed Ruchinsky’s exact room. The plan is simple, but does require a bit of luck to execute. Kurt volunteered his services, but with the trail he leaves there’s a risk of worrying hotel guests of fire. So did Kitty and handy as her talent is, I’m not putting her at risk for my problem.

At dusk I park my bike a few blocks from the hotel and fish a leather tool belt and a blue and black ball cap bearing a Trump logo from my pack. It should do the trick to cover my hair. Wow! I get a glimpse of myself in the side view mirror. Pretty good job becoming Jim Howlett, as my forged ID badge clipped to my belt reads.

I double time it for the employee entrance, but stop short to let a pair of what I guess are maids...er, room service, finish off their smokes. Coast clear, I cross my fingers and zip the badge through the magnetic reader. It works and my luck holds since the locker room sounds and looks vacant. Aside from lingering cigarette exhalations, body odors, industrial chemicals and such I don’t smell anybody near.

Ruchinsky likes to lodge in high style, but it’s simple locating the maintenance elevator for the penthouse suites. The fast ascent makes my ears pop. There are four penthouses on the floor separated by north-south and east-west running corridors between each suite. Ruchinsky’s in the southwest suite.

The joint’s well sound-proofed, but I can make out a television playing in the suite to my right. Water’s running in another suite. A woman’s laughter filters through the rooms directly adjacent my target.

I’m less than a body length from the door when I spot the handle twitch. I turn my back and make busy with a light fixture that’s doesn’t need fixing. Sure enough, I see Ruchinsky’s reflection in bit of polished tile---not that I need to, I’ll never forget his scent.

Keeping in character, I utter, “Evenin’, sir,” in my best nasally Bronx accent.

The best he can do is grunt. Suits me fine, because I don’t want to chance my disguise with face to face chat.

Time of day that it is, it’s a reasonable guess he’s headed for drinks and dinner. Gives me plenty of time. It’s a short trip back toward the service elevator. Adjacent to it is a closet that houses each suites security electronics. Disabling motion detectors at the main controller is spook one-o-one. So is bypassing the electro-magnetic entry locks. Takes me all of three minutes before I’m standing inside Ruchinsky’s suite.

This place is posh, with a capital P. Glassed in on two walls that form an L, it’s sleek and modern and dangerous. That is, there’s precious few spots to conceal myself should it come to that.

The lighting is set to dim, though it’s a bit brighter in what must be the bedroom and bath area. I scan the lounge and locate his laptop on the coffee table. Down on my knees, I won’t risk leaving a crease, indentation or warm spot on the leather sofa. I raise the screen. Nice, he didn’t power down.

According to Fury’s guy, I needn’t log in for the hacking-gizmo to work. In goes the thumb drive and a faint green light flickers telling me it’s active while the screen remains dark. Leaves me feeling skeptical. Techonolgy’s advanced at warp speed since the days I spooked for the Man.

Warned this takes a bit of time, I search the rest of the suite, specifically looking for his cell phone. Expected, it's not here. Probably has it on him. Yeah, well, I knew relieving him of it and hacking into it was gonna be a test.

The flickering thumb drive light turns red, indicating job done. I pull it out and slip it deep into my trouser pocket. From my tool belt I retrieve a canister of compressed air. I close the screen and give a quick spray over the case. A wipe down leaves no traces of heat or condensation.

Time to boogie and bide my time for step two of the plan. I make it four steps for the exit when I hear a shushing and muted electronic blips. He's back way sooner than I estimated. With few choices, I dive behind a support beam, situated in a tight squeeze in front of the floor-to-ceiling window juncture. Ideal it's not, since a reflection is a strong possibility. My faith in the gauzy strips of fabric pretending to be curtains saving me is about as strong as my faith in organized religion.

Thinking to become one with the concrete beam, I don't move or breathe. Thank fate he doesn't turn the lights up.

I don't need to breathe much to get a whiff of the alcoholic cloud wafting from him as he weaves just a few feet away. He's lit and, if his rummaging through the wet bar is any clue, he's about to burn brighter.

Nope. He pours a club soda then curses at the wedge of lime squirting back in his face.

I bite the inside of my cheek and smirk.

Definitely gone lard butt since our last encounter, as he plops down on the couch the air between the padding and upholstery wheeze. He opens his computer and I can't help clenching.

It's reflexive owing to Murphy's Law. I win this round.

As I watch him, the urge to gut this son of a gun is so powerful, it hurts. Not just my claws, but in my gut. It's corrosive, distracting.

Leave it, I counsel myself. I need him...for now. Plenty of time to eviscerate the weasel. Nice and slow, just like he did to me.

Ruchinsky takes his time. He types a bit, then fumbles with the TV remote. TV wins and he channel surfs before setting on pay-per-view porn. Prompted for a credit card number, he curses and retrieves his billfold from the breast pocket of his jacket---but he doesn't engage the start button. Instead, he weaves a crooked path to the bedroom, then bathroom. I hear the clink of a belt unbuckled and muffled thumps. Clothes and shoes dumped in a heap? Next, water hisses in the shower, splashes in the toilet.

Cripes! There's a sight that'd crumble an iceberg. He shambles out of the bathroom. Naked except for a towel around his waist, his wrinkled and ample belly looks like a sandbag about to bust. Sagging pectorals must measure a double D-at least.

Suddenly, he's right in front of me. I hold my breath, wishing my six foot-three, three-twenty pound frame small--invisible even.

Humming a flat tune to himself, he shuts down the laptop, then goes quiet, scouring the room with his eyes. Again, I take another trip to sphincter-clench city.

His gaze lands on the counter top over the wet bar. He mumbles, "There 'tis," and packs the laptop in its metal carrying case.

Laptop in tow, he trails back to the bedroom and again the bath. I hear the shower door creak open then click closed followed by a satisfied groan.

I don't waste a second getting back on task. All I have to do is get past the open bathroom door without being seen and then get back out. Lady Luck throws me a bone. From my vantage point, I see his reflection in the mirror. Soaping his bulk, he's facing opposite the passage way. So as to cast no shadow, I hug the wall and pad silently ahead. Ruchinsky's cell phone is on the bedside table. Retrieving SHIELDS gizmo from my tool belt, I connect it to the phone. A bar shows up at the bottom of the device. *C'mon, c'mon*, I coax inside my mind. Fury's flunky promised ninety seconds or less download time, but each incremental tick of color on the bar seems to take forever.

Bang! I jump. My silent curse is as ripe as Ruchinsky's coming from the bathroom. He's busting his own chops over dropping the shampoo.

I unclench, hopeful I've got at least a few more minutes. The task bar shows ninety percent complete. Ten more seconds finishes it and all the data on his phone is now copied to SHIELDS data chip. Unplugging, I switch the chips. If it works the way it's supposed to we can track every move, every call, text or data transfer he makes and he won't have a clue.

All's left to do is a clean escape. Simple stuff.

Nope. Murphy's back. I hear the water shut off. I hear the shower door creak open. I hear a bullfrog with laryngitis. He's singing?

Closet's too far, too much risk getting caught hiding there. Not optimal, I slip behind the floor-to-ceiling drapes and wedge myself between an armoire and the window. If I really have to, I can make a break for it---but carving window glass and scaling the building is definitely the hard way.

Ruchinsky casts a dim shadow as he proceeds in his birthday suit toward the lounge area. I don't dare move a muscle to get a visual.

I hear bawdy music coming from the TV. A few minutes later I hear a mix of cheesy dialog and bogus moaning. Aw, geez louise!

Suddenly, exiting the hard way seems appealing---but I don't want to blow my cover, don't want him to suspect he's been tagged. Cold-cocking the jerk comes to mind. Might be doing him a favor. Rip his credit cards, diamond Rolex and cash and it's all chalked up to a robbery.

It's even on who's making more noise---the TV or Ruchinsky, but his distraction is my opportunity. There's a closet in the vestibule between the bathroom and bedroom. In the ceiling of said closet is a hatch, if the plans are accurate. The hatch leads to a crawl space housing the suites HVAC. Good place to hide til he finishes his business and calls it an evening.

Hugging the walls again, I creep toward sanctuary. The hatch, a pull down with a ladder, creaks and my heart skips. The noise escapes Ruchinsky. I hoist myself into the cramped space, then struggle to ease the hatch closed. I can't stand, but I can crouch and wedge myself between the refrigerator sized heating and cooling units. Close as I am, once the heat cycles on, I just know I'm gonna get a singeing. Breathing in cobwebs and dust, I pinch my nostrils to keep a sneeze at bay.

Two hours later, after watching a second movie and excessive use of the mini-bar, Ruchinsky has fallen into bed and is stone dead asleep. His snoring sounds like a pig drowning in a mud hole. My body's one massive cramp and, yeah, I got scorch marks on one pants leg and sleeve. I use my weight to shove the hatch open. It still creaks, but Ruchinsky's in no condition to notice. The carpet padding shushes under my boots, but the white noise of the heating systems fan cancels it out. Except for photo electric safety lights mounted on baseboards, the suite is dark. I pause at the door, parsing for any scents or sounds on the other side. It's clear. I do a quick mental and physical check just to be sure I didn't leave any tools behind.

Punching the master code digits, I disengage the secure lock then reverse the process on the other side. The brightly lit corridor shocks my vision and I blink. But it's only seconds before I'm oriented and make my way back to security master control. Swiping my badge gets me in to reset the in-suite motion sensors.

I chuckle silently. I've thought it before, but, in another life I could've made myself filthy rich as a professional thief. Maybe I was in another life.

Almost no worries making my final exit. Two floors above the employee locker room, I'm joined in the elevator by a real maintenance man. The lettering on his shirt says Shift Supervisor. Peachy.

He looks me over, scans for my ID badge. He doesn't seem impressed. "HowLETT, huh?"

Hate it when some moron emphasizes that last syllable.

"You new 'round here?"

"First shift." My grin and enthusiasm's false.

His reply ain't. "'Zat so?" The elevator dings and settles, but boss man hits the door controller.

His tone's sharp as broken glass. "All right then boy, lemme give ya a tip. If'n ya don't want this to be your last shift, don't ever let me see ya wearin' no five o'clock shadow. Employees are to be clean shaved at all times." He releases the door and stalks off.

"Yes sir." And a nice evening to you too, bub. I don't waste effort flipping him off.

Exhaling, I will my heart rate to slow as beads of sweat form an itchy track down the back of my neck. Quick stepping it, I keep eyes on the floor and skip clocking out of my first and last shift. Couple minutes later, I'm switching out my Trump uniform shirt for plaid flannel and my leather jacket that I'd stowed in a saddle bag. On my way out, I toss the wadded up shirt and hat into a dumpster. I'll incinerate the ID badge later.

Paying the attendant a king's ransom for the pleasure of parking, I demonstrate my aggravation with an ear-splitting peel of rubber jetting out of the garage. I don't let off the throttle, even though I'm bound for hurry up and wait – wait for Ruchinsky to garrote himself with an electronic noose.

XXX