

FLIGHT OF THE RAT

It was the question on everyone's lips anymore. Not where were you when JFK got shot? (Five years from birth, actually.) Or Reagan? (In Mrs. Streicher's English class.) Or when the space shuttle exploded? (Watching it in science class. Miss Gadowski, my senior physics teacher freaked out in front of the whole class.)

None of that seemed to matter anymore. It was the first time I found myself in the middle of a calamity. I hadn't left Cleveland in almost three weeks, but I managed to chase one stupid city clerk right into the mouth of the lion. So where was I September 11, 2001?

Hopkins International Airport, accompanied by a big Algerian, hoping the love of my life had missed her flight.

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"So where's Margo now?"

As Houari Zaoual, aka Harry Z, navigated his Tahoe through long-term parking, I checked my watch. "I'd say leaving Logan International now. She'll be in Los Angeles by noon." I refocused on the cars in the lot. We were looking for a BMW sedan.

"You're gonna love LA, man," said Harry, his voice deep, his accent a mixture of Arabic and French. "Beaches, mountains, sunny all year..."

"Anorexic starlets," I said. "Earthquakes, traffic that makes Cleveland look like a country town on a Monday night." As we reached the end of a row and started down the next, I turned to him. "Racist cops."

Harry frowned, his dark, shaven head gleaming in the early morning sun. "At least you won't have to worry about that, Kepler. They like pasty white boys like you out

there." He grinned, which could either be charming or frightening, depending whether Harry was looking for you and why.

"Yes, but Margo will get pulled over by those fucks just for being outside, and I'll get it for being with her." I folded my arms and began scanning the next row of cars.

"Besides, Los Angeles has my vote for Most Fucked-up City in America."

Jets roared above us about every minute, on their way into or out of Hopkins International. I had to smile when I saw them. They looked impressive in the clear fall sky. From the corner of my eye, I watched an MD-11 touch down, then realized I wouldn't even have been there if it weren't for Ron Bondini.

"You don't think he ditched the Beamer, do you?" I said.

"Yeah, I do." Harry hit the brakes and pointed. "Right over there."

I looked down at my notebook, then over at the sedan in front of our truck. "Plate matches. That's him."

Harry parked the Tahoe directly behind the car and opened his door. "I'll check it out. You call the cops."

"Why do I have to call?"

"Look, you're the PI. You investigate." He jumped out, turned back, and grinned at me again. "I'm the bounty hunter. I kick ass."

I snorted as I dialed the Cleveland Police. "Yeah, well, Mr. Bounty Hunter, just remember you owe me fifty an hour for this, and the clock's coming up on twenty-one hours."

As I talked with Lt. Grady in Financial Crimes, Harry circled the Beamer. It was empty, locked. A baby seat had been left in the back, tipped on its side as though to make

room for something. Harry jumped back into the Tahoe. "Bondini's cousin is going to shit when he gets his car back."

"Why?"

"Our fugitive left a day's worth of fast food wrappers and cups all over the front seat."

"How do you know it's not his cousin's trash?"

Harry gave me one of those looks. "Don't you remember his house? When was the last time you saw a man that obsessed with using coasters?"

"I stand corrected."

We sat and waited for airport security to arrive. They would discreetly watch the car while we went into the terminal to look for Bondini. As they pulled up in an unmarked car, I reached into my pocket and handed Harry a set of keys dangling from a remote. "Here."

"What's this?" asked Harry.

"Mrs. Padasco's set. She handed them to me while her husband was fussing over the coasters. Maybe you should arrange a surprise for Bondini, in case he doubles back."

"Maybe I should."

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Inside, the guards were less than cooperative. Unfortunately, Harry spoke first, and all the security chief, named Ballard, could do was focus on his faintly Arabic accent. Normally, Harry could glare down at someone and intimidate them. That just made Ballard more nervous. He started talking to me.

He was a short guy, about fifty, with the beginnings of a beer gut. He jabbed his finger at my chest when he talked. "You come in here with... with... with... ?"

"A raghead? Some uppity nigger? What were you going to say?" I watched Ballard recoil. Reaching into my windbreaker, I produced my copy of Harry's affidavit. "We come in here as fugitive apprehension agents in search of one Ronald Bondini, who skipped bail yesterday. Mr. Bondini is now wanted by the Cleveland Police..."

"The airport isn't in city limits." He sounded like a little kid.

"Which is why they've sent two bounty hunters after him." I folded my arms and stepped closer. "Look, this case could go Federal. If it does, and the FBI or the Marshals have to go looking for him, what do you think will happen to your job?"

His gaze shifted from me to Harry, who was grinning, and back to me. "I'll need your weapons."

"Why?" I asked.

Harry shook his head. "Don't worry, Nick. If Bondini's waiting on a plane, he couldn't get a weapon through the baggage check, not carry-on, anyway. If we need help, I'm sure Mr. Ballard here can have someone armed out there quickly." He smiled at Ballard, who seemed to wince. "Isn't that right, Mr. Ballard?"

"Do you both have permits to carry?" We showed him our permits, my investigator's license, Harry's business card, the original copy of the affidavit to arrest Bondini, and both our driver's licenses. I then gave my Browning 9mm.

The site of an old police weapon made him smile. "Hey, didn't they used to carry these down in Medina County?" he asked as he checked the chamber and popped the clip.

"Yeah, I was on the Brunswick force for five years," I said.

He looked up at me, his sudden good mood gone. "Oh. You're that guy."

I frowned. He must have been on a force in one of the neighboring towns down there, although I didn't remember him. "Yeah, I'm him. And Petoskey deserved what he got."

Ballard just shook his head. "What about professional courtesy?"

"What about 'love, honor, and cherish'? Pounding on your wife just as your partner comes in does not warrant professional courtesy."

He turned away from me quickly and stopped, jaw hanging.

From inside Harry's jacket came a Colt Python. I'd never seen Harry use it, other than to scare the hell out of a bail jumper. He preferred smaller guns. So did I. "Doubles as a cigarette lighter."

Ballard gingerly took the gun from Harry and removed the bullets. "Try not to disrupt operations. We have an airport to run here."

I thought of six or seven truly smart-ass things to say to him. I said none of them. "Cleveland will probably have someone here shortly, if they don't already."

That didn't seem to satisfy Ballard. I didn't care. I'd been up for almost twenty-four hours chasing Bondini. All I wanted was to go to bed.

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At least a dozen airlines serviced Hopkins International. The big ones, like Delta, United, and American, all had multiple counters. We only needed to talk to one for each. The Delta agent got nervous and called Ballard. Over at United, the woman tried to make us wait while she processed passengers. I flashed my investigator's license at her and said "Detective," explaining that we were searching for a fugitive. Even false officialdom could persuade the officious. She huffed and looked up the names "Ronald Bondini" and "Terry Padasco." The latter name belonged to the owner of the Beamer we'd found. At

both Delta and United, we struck out. Padasco would be happy to learn his cousin hadn't used his credit card.

Yet.

Moving onto Continental, which had a hub at Hopkins, we struck out again when an idea struck me. "Try 'Jerry Paluska.'"

The agent, a perky young red head in her early twenties, popped her gum as she tapped the keys. People either clammed up or chatted wildly when confronted with authority, real or perceived. Harry and I counted as both that morning. The Continental agent was a chatter. "Jerry Paluska. Booked a flight to Nassau via Miami for 9:30 this morning. Paid by Discover."

"Do you have a home address for him?"

She glanced at her screen and rattled off a Cleveland Heights address.

I smiled. "His girlfriend's husband."

Harry laughed. "Wonder if Bondini picked his pocket, or did she?"

I shrugged. We got the gate number and headed inside.

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It's surreal now when I look back on it, how easy it was, even at 9 AM on that particular morning, to get past the metal detectors at an airport. When I went through with a pair of handcuffs I forgot to put in the tray, the screeners just looked at me amused. I showed them my holster and said I'd checked my gun with security.

Harry, though, scared the hell out of them.

I'd never really noticed blacks getting scrutinized more, but when Harry placed his own set of cuffs in the tray, the screeners eyed him warily. When he stepped through, one screener asked to see his ID. The color drained from his face.

"And what are you doing here today, Mr. Zaoual?" he asked, ready to call an armed guard over.

"Chasing down a fugitive," he said. That accent didn't help his situation one bit.

"We're bounty hunters in search of a bail jumper," I said, stepping over to the metal detector, my copy of the affidavit in hand. "We have reason to believe our man is waiting for a flight to the Bahamas at one of the Continental gates."

The screener eyed Harry, then me, suspiciously. "I'll have to call this in."

I handed him my cell phone. "Look, you can call the Cleveland Police. Ask for Lieutenant Grady in the Financial Crimes Unit. Or call Frank Windsor in Homicide and tell him Kepler's here."

He looked at my phone, then at the armed guard, who was speaking in hushed tones into his shoulder rig. The guard nodded at us. "Clear 'em. Ballard checked their weapons in about twenty minutes ago."

The screener shrugged. "So the cuffs are to arrest the guy?"

"No," I said. "I'm Harry's bitch, and a fugitive apprehension gets him horny. Do they sell Vaseline at the travel shop? I don't want to be walking funny when we drag this guy into the Justice Center later."

He didn't think that was funny.

We started toward the main concourse. Harry glared at me. "You really didn't have to say that."

"No, but it got him out of our hair, didn't it?"

Harry rolled his eyes and started to say something, then stopped. He stared at a TV in one of the lounges. "What the hell is that?"

I turned and looked. "That's the World Trade Center and... Shit! What happened?"
On the screen, one of the Trade Center towers billowed black smoke from near the top.

A bored looking woman, fiftyish, with bottled-red hair, stepped up to us, frowning. "They think some idiot was buzzing the Trade Center and managed to crash into it." She shook her head. "Gonna be a bitch to put that one out."

"I'll bet," I said. I glanced at my watch. "We've got about half an hour before 'Paluska' begins his voluntary exile."

Harry cocked his head toward the people mover. "Let's get down there before he changes his mind."

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We rode down the mover in silence, glancing at TV's at each gate we passed. It could not have been more than five minutes since we first saw the smoking tower on CNN Airport when I turned my head and saw it. The second Trade Center tower exploded in a fireball near the top. People were on their feet instantly, gasping, murmuring. Many, myself included, stood slack-jawed, unable to speak.

"That's no joy rider buzzing skyscrapers," I said finally.

Harry shook his head. "No, I think it's why I left Algeria. I hope I'm wrong." Harry had a low tolerance for religious zealots and military dictatorships, having been raised alongside both.

"I hope you are, too." Something cold and heavy settled in the pit of my stomach.
"I gotta call Margo."

Harry gently touched my arm as I reached for my phone. "Forget it. We've got a job to do. You can check on her on the way back downtown."

I hated to admit it, but he was right. We didn't know what was happening. I'd have plenty of time to stare, wide-eyed and speechless, at CNN later, once Bondini was back in the hands of the Cleveland Police. I'd call Margo then.

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By the time we'd reached the Continental terminal, the air had changed. We had begun moving amongst bored, nearly-sleepwalking travelers. With each passing gate, we could here more conversation buzzing. First whispers came from seated passengers, then open conversations. More and more people were on their feet with each passing second, most pacing, many speaking hurriedly into cell phones. At the gate where "Jerry Paluska" would wait to begin his new life on the Jamaican mob's bank account, a kind of controlled panic had set in. The whole thing crystallized when, of all people, Ron Bondini, said to no one in particular, "That looked like a jet that hit the building."

For whatever morbid reason, CNN insisted on playing footage of the Trade Center's south tower being hit over and over. Harry and I stood staring like idiots. It looked like a bad Jerry Bruckheimer film. Any minute now, Nicholas Cage or Bruce Willis would start kicking major ass. We hoped.

I shook myself out of my trance. Like Harry said, we were here on a job. I pointed to the crowd. "There he is. Doesn't even see us."

Ron Bondini, a slight man with dark brown hair and large glasses, stood at the back of the crowd, transfixed, as we all were, by the destruction playing out on TV.

Harry nodded. "I'll stay here. You just go over and talk to that lady." He indicated the Continental agent near the gate.

I strolled over to her, showed her my investigators license, as well as the affidavit. "I'm here in search of a fugitive whom we believe is trying to flee the country. He's registered under the name 'Jerry Paluska.'"

The agent went down her manifest, looking for the name. "Yes, right here. Shall I...?"

"I want you to arrange for him to be bumped from his flight."

"I have to ask for volunteers first."

I shook my head. "He doesn't know that."

"But..."

"Look, ma'am," I said, slipping into my Joe Friday monotone, "this gentleman had an arrangement with the County Prosecutor's office to plead to a minor charge in exchange for information about a very powerful crime figure here in the city. Now, if he gets on that plane and makes it to Miami, he might change his identity one more time and make it to the Bahamas, leaving a very nasty man free to do business here in Cleveland. If you quietly bump him, we can apprehend him without a scene."

"I'll see what I can..." Her phone rang. "Yes?... For how long?... Is it because of what's happening on TV?... Do they know what happened yet?... Okay, I'll tell them."

I watched as I suddenly ceased to exist in her world. She turned her back to me and called out to the crowd. "Ladies and gentlemen, due to the emergency in New York City, the FAA has asked that we delay the flight for at least one hour." Outside, a 767 with Continental's logo and colors rolled up to the gate. "We will not be boarding until we've been given clearance by the airline and the FAA. If you wish, you may wait at the lounge or in the food court or remain here until we begin boarding. We apologize for the inconvenience and thank you for flying Continental."

I glanced at Harry and grinned. "Thank God for the Feds."

The crowd began to break up as many headed back to the food court and lounge. Some, though, remained to watch what happened next on TV. By now, the tops of both World Trade Center towers were obscured by smoke. I resisted the urge to call Margo, but just barely.

Bondini was among those who stood staring at the spectacle. Harry stepped up behind him. I moved over to his side.

"Hello, Mr. Paluska," I said.

Bondini nearly jumped out of his skin. He looked around wildly, stunned by Harry's presence, then mine. "Ke- Ke- Kepler? What do you want?"

"To go home and go to bed, Ronald," I said, managing to become oblivious to the disaster du jour. I wish I could still think of it as that. "I've been up almost twenty-four hours straight chasing your sorry ass all over the county."

Harry put a thick hand on his shoulder.

Bondini flinched. "What are you going to do?"

"Andy Scarpelli put up ten grand to get you out of jail last week," said Harry.

"And the prosecutor cut you a honey of a deal," I added. "All you had to do was show up in court yesterday. Instead, you steal your cousin's car and your girlfriend's husband's credit card. Now we find you here, hoping to leave the country. Do you really think you're safe from Marcus Waller in the Bahamas, Ronny? Don't you think he has men down there looking after his numbered bank accounts?"

Harry grabbed one of his arms and slapped a cuff on it. He started to cuff the other arm. "Come along, Mr. Bondini. I'm sure the sheriff can arrange some jailhouse protection."

Bondini swallowed. "You don't understand... If I stay in Cleveland, Waller will kill me!"

"So will your wife," I said, "but that's not our problem." After all, she hadn't been my client for over a week now.

Bondini glanced around, eyes wide, struggling to keep Harry from cuffing his other arm. Normally, this would be an easy take for Harry. Fugitives tended avoid making scenes in public places. When I saw Bondini's eyes fix on the TV and the smoking towers on television, I moved in close.

Bondini kicked Harry in the knee and wrenched his arm free. He lunged forward and tackled me, knocking me on my back. He took off for the people mover.

"Help me!" he shouted. "They're terrorists! They're trying to take me hostage!"

"Shit!" said Harry, hobbling after him.

I pulled myself to my feet and took off with him.

"Stop them!" Bondini screamed to a pair of security guards rushing to check out the commotion. "They want to hijack the plane!"

The guards and several travelers, already bewildered by the scene on television, moved to intercept us.

"Bounty hunters!" I shouted to the guards, who had their guns drawn. "That man's a fugitive."

That just made matters worse. The guards and the crowd stood confused, watching Bondini run down the concourse. Throwing up my hands, I motioned one of the guards over to us. Slowly, and for the umpteenth time that morning, I produced the photocopy of the affidavit commissioning one Houari Zaoual, and subsequently, me, to track down and arrest Ronald Bondini of University Heights.

Harry stood fuming, but said nothing, all but certain he had the most unpopular accent on the premises at the moment. I, on the other hand, clearly being of European heritage with a pure rust belt accent, launched into a string of obscenities in four languages, including Yiddish and Polish. The guard looked over the affidavit, called it in on his shoulder rig, and then nodded to us.

"Why didn't you let us know you were here?" the guard, an older, heavy-set guy who looked Mexican.

I just rolled my eyes. "We did. Didn't Ballard let you guys know we were here?"

The guard's expression softened as he pointed to the television. "He's sort of had his hands full, listening for FAA instructions."

I had to give him that. "Fine. Do you mind if we look for our man, or are you kicking everyone out of the airport right now?"

The guard sighed. "Don't matter to me. I just heard a rumor that the FAA going to shut all the airports down pretty soon. Apparently, those two planes were hijacked airliners."

I must have frozen or turned pale or something, because both the guard and Harry were eyeing me nervously now.

"Are you all right, Nick?" said Harry. "You don't look so well."

To Hell with Bondini. I pulled out my cell and dialed Margo's number. Unfortunately, all I got for my trouble was an "all circuits busy" message. "The lines in Boston are jammed. I can't get through."

"You know someone flying today?" asked the guard. "Why don't you wait awhile? They should be on the ground pretty soon if the Feds shut everything down."

"I hope so," I said. "I hope so."

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Ten minutes later, every single gate was jammed with passengers. The FAA had given the order. Every civilian aircraft in the United States was to put down immediately. Whatever fatigue I'd been feeling up to that point gave way to adrenaline. The building seemed to spin around me as I tried to make sense of where I was. Where the hell was Margo?

"That sonofabitch couldn't have picked a better time to flee," Harry muttered under his breath. "This place is nothing but mass confusion."

Harry's subdued tirade caught some people's attention, garnering dirty looks. While no one had said anything yet, smart money went on the attackers being from the Middle East. Harry, while from North Africa, had the right accent to arouse suspicion.

"You might want to keep your voice down," I said, "or, at least, try to do your best homeboy voice while we're here."

Harry glanced at me sideways. "Please, Kepler, you'd think..."

"I think," I said as gently as possible, "that you need to be a little more mindful of latent prejudice right about now. Like it or not, anybody with your accent and legal name is going to be under a microscope. And if the cowards in New York City are from the Middle East, they're going to stay there for a while."

He looked at me, scowling.

"Look, less Omar Sharif and more Passenger 57. You can be the big, mean Muslim when we find Bondini."

"Big, mean, lapsed Muslim," Harry corrected. Next to him, I was the poster boy for piety and faith.

Harry's phone chimed. "Yes." He listened for several seconds. "Are you on top of him now?" He waited a few more seconds. "What's he doing?" After a couple more seconds, he threw back his head and laughed. "By all means! Help him out! He is a stranded motorist, after all." He hung up, turned to me, and grinned. "Guess who's having car trouble?"

I wasn't paying attention. I'd caught a television out of the corner of my eye. "Holy Mother of God," I mumbled.

On CNN, the South Tower collapsed in a huge cloud of debris. Harry stood watching expressionless. Around us, a few people gasped. Some started crying. Overall, though, it had become way too quiet for a crowded international airport.

Shaking, I pulled out my phone again. Never mind that all circuits in Boston were jammed. The phone screeched that annoying beeping tone that made a busy signal sound like a Mozart symphony. Hell, now the lines in Cleveland were swamped. "Shit! I gotta get through to Margo."

Harry put a hand on my shoulder and squeezed. "Relax, man. I'm sure she's all right."

"You sure? Where'd those planes take off from this morning? Do you know?"

"Boston," an old man said helpfully. "I hear they took off from Boston."

Through my sudden catatonia, I was vaguely aware of Harry guiding me out of the building and back to his Tahoe.

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I'd come back to reality as we drove up behind Bondini's stolen BMW. Only then did I realize that Harry had retrieved our spare guns from the back of the truck. He had his .357. I had a .38 Special that I rarely used.

The airport security we'd called had traded their duty jackets for civilian windbreakers. One guy, a white-haired rail of a man tanned until he was almost Harry's color, leaned under the open hood of the Beamer, Chief Wahoo smiling across the back of his Indians jacket. His partner, a young black woman in a Cavs pull-over, stood on the opposite side of the car, shaking her head. Bondini sat in the car, glancing around nervously. Harry parked the Tahoe, blocking in the Beamer.

White Hair looked up at me, frowning. "Looks like his battery's disconnected." His face betrayed no deception.

Cavs Lady, however, did not bother to hide her amusement. "Your idea?"

Bondini started to open his door, only to have Cavs Lady shove it closed on him. White Hair and I blocked the passenger side. Bondini dove for the glove box, then looked up at me. I had my .38 on him.

"We're outside now, dipshit," I said. "Open the goddamned door before I shoot out the window."

Bondini sat up, rested his arms against the steering wheel, and buried his face in his hands. "I'm dead," I heard him wail as Harry opened the door. "I'm dead. They're gonna kill me for sure, now."

Harry gently pulled him from the car and reached behind him. Bondini still wore the dangling set of cuffs. Harry locked them on Bondini's free arm.

"C'mon, Ronald," said Harry. "Let's get you into a nice, safe jail cell."

Another car pulled up, a blue American sedan with a buggy-whip antenna on the trunk lid. Two people got out, a tall, fortyish redhead whom I knew as Yablonsky, and a short, balding guy with a thin mustache, name of Ginelli. They flashed their Cleveland Police badges at the airport guards.

"Everything in hand, fellas?" asked Yablonsky.

Harry flashed his winning smile, which seemed to make Yablonsky smile. "Just peachy, Sergeant. Do you want this loser, or should I and my associate take him in?"

Yablonsky shrugged. "You do it. Less paperwork, and Pat and I don't feel like listening to him whine." She glanced at White Hair. "We'll need statements from you two. Do you have a few minutes?"

White Hair spread his hands. "Don't matter to me. All hell's breaking loose inside the airport anyway."

His dedication to duty underwhelmed me. I opened the door to the Tahoe, and Harry pushed Bondini into the backseat. I turned to Yablonsky. "Meet you at the Justice Center?"

Yablonsky nodded, then waved as she and Ginelli led the two airport guards to their car.

All the way back downtown, Bondini mewled like a kitten.

As we rolled onto the Innerbelt and over the Flats, I turned to Bondini, reached across the seat, and grabbed him by the collar. "Look, asshole, I've been up for over twenty-four hours chasing your scrawny ass all over Cuyahoga County. Do you know what the fucking hell's going on right now?"

"But Waller will kill..."

"Do you think I give a flying rat's ass if Waller kills you? People are dying out there! Needlessly! What makes you think I care what some gangster does to you?"

"Easy, Nick," said Harry. "Don't be getting me a law suit over this."

I turned around and settled into my seat. "Talk to the fucking prosecutor, Bondini. You might get some protection." I folded my arms. "Like a nice, quiet jail cell."

Harry decided to turn on the radio. Bad idea. He tuned into WTAM, Cleveland's main all-news station, and the news was all bad. The other tower had come down, and no one was sure where the president was. Bondini stopped whimpering long enough to say, "Jesus, what'll those fucking rag heads do next?"

Harry said nothing, but his jaw tightened. I could tell he was silently counting to ten. I just shook my head.

We dropped off the Innerbelt and onto Ontario, only to see traffic leading to the freeway backed up past Public Square.

"What the hell?" I muttered.

Harry's phone chirped. "Zaoual." He listened for several seconds, then smacked the steering wheel as we passed Jacobs Field. "Sonofabitch! Can they hold him there?" He listened a few more seconds. "All right." He clicked off the cell phone. "That was Grady. Guess what this traffic's from?"

"They think Key Tower and the BP Building are next?" I said, more than half-seriously.

"They're evacuating most of downtown." As we stopped for a light at Prospect, Harry turned to Bondini. "That means you're going over to Homicide until they reopen the Justice Center."

Bondini swallowed hard.

Harry turned back to me. "Another plane went down just east of Pittsburgh. They think it was headed for Washington. The Pentagon was hit about half an hour after the World Trade Center."

"Holy fuck, what are you sand niggers doing?" said Bondini.

I turned around and grabbed him by the shirt again. "If you ever say that again in my presence," I said in a growl, "I will drag you over to the Conrail Bridge and throw you off head first when the next freighter passes. Got it?"

"This violates my..."

"Shut up! Shut up! Shut the fucking hell up!"

I felt Harry grab my arm. "Hey, man, chill. Why don't you call Channel Four and see if they've heard from Margo. Wasn't she interviewing in Boston today?"

"Yesterday," I said. "Remember? She was flying to LA this morning."

Harry just nodded. I knew what he was thinking now. I'd been thinking it ever since the second tower was hit.

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Homicide did not operate out of the Justice Center. Instead, they made their home on Payne Ave. at District 3 headquarters. It was an old building, dating back to Eliot Ness's time as Public Safety Director. The place had the smell of old government buildings, reeking of years of stale tobacco and industrial cleansers. I hated the walls the most. I never understood why public buildings built before 1960 were only painted piss yellow or putrid green.

We hauled Bondini to the squad room for booking. Lt. Grady, head of the Financial Crimes Unit, met us. She was of average height, light brown hair, late thirties, her face stern. I bet she gave her kids and husband that same look when they got on her nerves.

"We brought you a present," said Harry, grinning.

She shook her head as Harry and I maneuvered Bondini into a seat. He began whimpering again.

"Ron, Ron, Ron," she said wistfully. "What are we going to do with you?"

"Waller will kill me if I talk," Bondini blubbered.

I laughed. Like an idiot, I laughed uncontrollably. I was tired, pissed off, and just a little scared. Fatigue, stress, and fear will do that to a body.

"Shut up, Kepler," Grady snapped. "Do you have the affidavit?"

Harry reached into his jacket and handed her his original copy. Grady signed it and handed it back.

"Thanks, boys," she said. "As soon as all hell stops breaking loose, we'll take him back to the Justice Center."

I could feel myself sink inward a bit. "Do they know what's going on?"

Grady sighed. "Three hijacked planes kamikazed into the World Trade Center and the Pentagon. There's rumors that another one crashed over by Pittsburgh before it could reach DC. I suppose you know the Trade Center's gone."

I nodded. I must have winced, because both Grady and Harry's expressions changed.

"Did you know someone there?" asked Grady.

"My girlfriend was supposed to fly to LA from Boston this morning," I said hoarsely. "I haven't been able to get through to her."

"Goddamn sand niggers!" muttered Bondini.

Harry grabbed my arm and ushered me out of the room before I could strangle Bondini.

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Harry had a loft just west of Downtown in the Warehouse District. Decked out in lavish furnishings and a sound system George Lucas would have envied, Harry treated

himself to the best on his clients' generosity. It afforded him a certain level of comfort, not to mention an unending number of female house guests.

He played jazz on the stereo 24/7. That didn't bother me, although my preference was for the blues. We went back to his place to hang out until things settled down. Besides, I didn't feel much like driving, even if it was just back to Lakewood.

He had on CNN. We settled in with a couple of beers to watch the drama unfold. We flipped over to Fox just long enough to hear Alexander Haig tell us that our civil liberties would shrink and we should just get over it.

"Goddamn fascist sonofabitch!" I yelled, spilling beer on Harry's expensive sofa.

Harry cocked his head up to the second floor of the loft. "Hey, man, you ought to go crash in the guest room for a bit. New York will still be on fire when you get up."

I shook my head. "I won't be able to sleep until I know Margo's safe. Put it back on CNN."

"I'll do better." He flipped to Channel Four, Margo's current employer. So far, all we had was the network feed. No local coverage. Why should they cover Cleveland? Downtown had cleared out, and the airport had been locked down. With the increasing talk of the terrorists... We were now admitting these were terrorists... being Middle Eastern and Muslim, I wondered how Harry had managed to get through the morning without more hassle than he did.

"Your job just got tougher, you know," I said.

Harry tipped back his beer and took a deep swallow. "I'm used to it. Remember, Algeria's not a happy place for a guy like me."

"Neither's America, especially after today."

He shrugged. "I get hassled because I'm black. I get hassled because I have an Algerian accent. Back in Algiers, I was threatened with death because I renounced Islam and wouldn't kiss any jackboot's ass. Over here, I'm just... different. I get hassled for it, but nothing more."

"For now," I said. "You forget. Rednecks and homeboys can be about as nasty as some of those yahoos you left behind."

Harry nodded, then grinned. "I just gotta be one of the homies, then. Dig?" His accent was flawless urban American. "That, or get me a pickup and some Hank, Jr., CD's." Now he sounded like one of the Dukes of Hazzard.

I shook my head. "You won't. I know you. You'll go on being Harry Z, smooth-talking bad-ass."

He raised his bottle to me, then took a long pull on the bottle. "Just like I know you won't leave town."

I cocked my head. "What do you mean?"

"Well, my guess is that, if Margo was on another plane, she'll only get the Boston interview this week. If they like her, and you know they will, you won't follow her to Boston."

"Now what makes you say that?"

"Because I know you. You could get back into insurance full time, maybe even work for the DA out there. Hell, you've got the background. But you won't do it. And you won't risk starting over as a solo PI in another city."

I shrugged. "I could join an agency."

"You?"

"I'll have you know I interviewed with Pinkerton's when the insurance company downsized me."

"And you turned them down, if I remember correctly." He shook his head and pointed the beer bottle at me. "No, Nicky, I hate to say it, but you're too much of a loner, and you're too rooted to your hometown to leave it. And if Margo goes to Boston..."

I glanced at the television, now feeling a little detached from the destruction in Lower Manhattan. "Let's hope Boston's an option for her right now."

"You don't want her to get the Boston job."

"I do."

"But you don't want her to leave."

I sighed. "Well, who said life was fair?"

"Not Ronald Bondini."

We both laughed. I needed that.

The network cut away for local coverage, and Tammy Messing, the early evening anchor for Channel Four came on. "We take you now to Boston, where our own Margo Westphal has been stranded at Logan International since this morning. Margo, you might say you had a close call, didn't you?"

I stood and pumped my fist into the air. "Yes! Goddammit, yes!"

Margo appeared on the screen. Tall, with dark brown skin and big, expressive eyes, she could make time stand still for me, even on television.

"That's right," said Margo, trying valiantly to sound detached. She had a haunted look in her eyes, though. Didn't we all that day? "I was supposed to be flying to Los Angeles this morning, but I missed my plane due to traffic."

"Margo, can you confirm whether your flight..."

I didn't care if hers was one of the planes that crashed into the Trade Center. After I got some sleep and could digest what was happening, I'd feel the rage over all those deaths, but, for now, I didn't care. The one person I cared about was alive and on television. I couldn't help it. I started laughing again.

Harry watched me with amusement. "Must be in love."

* * * * *

I slept like a log in Harry's guest room that day and into the night. I woke up around five-thirty the next morning, stiff from being up nearly thirty hours and sleeping twelve. I pulled on my jeans and a T-Shirt, went downstairs, and made some coffee. The city hummed as it always did first thing in the morning. I could hear a garbage truck groaning a few blocks away, and traffic was picking up on the Shoreway. I could hear it roar. Something wasn't right, though.

No jets. I looked up into that clear, blue September sky. Not a single plane crossed the sky, not even the contrail of a passing jet. None of the traffic copters buzzed overhead, keeping their usual tabs on the Innerbelt and Shoreway. I sipped my coffee and wondered. Did I just wake up in a different world?

Margo had called me late the afternoon before. The Boston station put her on the air and had her covering the situation at Logan. With the airlines grounded for a few days, she'd be in Boston until at least the weekend. Their station manager wanted to meet with her again. He had already called Murphy, her boss at Channel Four.

Yeah, it was a different world. I didn't expect to see National Guard troops patrolling downtown or dusk-to-dawn curfews. America would never tolerate it. Still, my world had changed. I'd have to have Harry's back now. He was as suspicious a figure as an Asian during World War II, for reasons just as shaky. I'd be alone soon. I knew it. I'd

go through the motions of finding a job in Boston, but Harry was right. I'd never leave Cleveland, and Margo would never stay.

Somehow, I knew Margo would still be at Channel Four if it weren't for the attacks. Few people would bat an eyelash at Harry, unless they were picking a fight. That was before extremist cowards turned the world upside down. Changes were coming, all right. The changes for me I could do without.