

RESOURCE MAGAZINE

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One Night

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Diary of a Location Scout: Helipads

PART II of III
by "Chris Scout"

"Wars are just blood-sport, son. No more a conflict between nations than professional wrestling..." Who is this nut? I kept thinking. They call this security? I glanced at his badge as we climbed the multi-storied beige-painted metal stairs to the roof, but the wind flipped it up before I could make out the name. Then I noticed something about him that I had dismissed earlier as just my usual dislike of authority: he made me feel uneasy. The kind of unease you feel at a funeral in the presence of a dead body. I glanced at him just long enough to confirm this feeling. His face was pale, his eyes flat. Animated death. Spooky, I thought, making light of my macabre thoughts the way I always do. Only the clenching of my gut told me that this was not just my imagination. It seemed as if I had located a ghoul!

The view of the surrounding city was spectacular and I think it was the beauty of New York alone that kept me sane as we climbed. The sunlight on the neighboring skyscrapers and the streets between them was stark and contrasted. Subtle shades of blues hollowed out the shadows giving them depth and illuminating windows, while orange light lined the edges until turning gold at the tops of the buildings. The air was cooling and the sounds of traffic and occasional voices rose up clearly as the sun prepared to set.

We were near the top of a skyscraper in Manhattan and a little before we reached the top I finally read "Dan Burisch" under the flicker of the plastic coating clipped to my security agent's chest. Nowadays you can't go anywhere without security, I thought to myself. They had given me a temporary nametag on which I almost wrote, "Don't Taze Me, Bro!" I'm not sure I was joking. I decided it might be best to keep him occupied with his topic of choice:

"So, uh, Dan," I asked. "Who's playing the next game and when's kick-off? Cuz I like to have my game snacks and stuff ready." "U.S.A. against China, 2008-9," he said without a hint of emotion.

"What about Iran?"

"Poppycock. That's small-time skirmishing. We need some population density reduction and everyone knows China's the biggest game in town."

"But don't we owe the Chinese a lot of money?"

"Exactly."

I was on a job for a global financial institution looking for helipads. Manhattan has the largest wealth disparity outside of a leper colony near a Hawaiian retirement home, or so I had heard on NPR, so I figured this would be a piece of cake. There must be a whole class of people who never touch pavement, like in Rio, where all the wealthy people travel by helicopter to avoid the enormity of their poorer brethren. Piece of cake? More like "let them eat cake." Anyway, I said to myself, trying to change the subject in my mind, looking for a helipad was turning out to be more like pie in the sky. As Vincent from the Port Authority had so kindly explained to me the previous day:

"Naah! No such animal. You ain't gonna find no such helipad on a building in this city!"

"Really!?" I asked, shocked the way New York City always shocks, by telling us we know less than we think.

"Yeah, there was some kinda' accident at the old Pan Am building back in the '70s. Bunch 'a people got bladed when a helicopter fell over... killed that sexploitation guy, Michael Findlay... Cut his head right clean off... Him and his wife. Whuunk!"

"Sounds Karmic." I stated, hoping for some useful information.

"What? You seen the one with Karma? I ain't never seen that. I gotta look that one up. I only heard about the Flesh trilogy."

"When will this job end? I was already wondering and it had hardly started."

"OK, Vincent. Are you trying to tell me that because some porn king and his 'wife' died in a horrible decapitating accident on top of what was known as the Pan Am building back in the '70s, there is not one helipad on any of the skyscrapers in Manhattan?"

"Exactly! Them and a coupla people got hit on the ground up by 42nd St."

"Maybe they were renting the films..." I suggested.

"What? Oh, you can find 'em. I got the whole trilogy at my store in Newark."

"And you haven't died in a helicopter accident yet?" I joked.

"Naah! I never fly, bro. Don't go near 'em! Not since 9/11."

"Well, what happened to the helipad that was at the Pan Am building? I mean we can photoshop the copter in post-prod."

"Oh, yeah, like in the movies. You could call 'em... it's now the Met Life, I think, but I could be wrong."

And call them I did, and was told the entire pad was now riddled with antennas. Besides, it was too many stories tall for there to be enough non-specific buildings in the backdrop. The client did not necessarily want the pad to look like it was in New York. They just wanted to shoot in the City because apparently the photographer they were using no longer travels now that the Concorde has been decommissioned. With only name-brand buildings like the Chrysler Building in the backdrop, that location was definitely out.



No one could help me, not the Mayor's Office, not the other heliports along the Hudson and East Rivers. Nada. I called and spoke to anyone and everyone even closely associated with flight and helicopters. I actually spoke to a man who went by the name of J.Rod, who claimed he worked on the Apollo Moon Landings. After ascertaining that he knew nothing about helipads, I couldn't help asking him:

"So, uh, J.Rod is it? Um, did we really make it to the moon or what?"

"Oh yeah, no doubt about it." He spoke very fast and seemed more than happy to talk about the topic. "But we had help, otherwise we woulda' never made it through the Belts..."

"Help? What do you mean, help?" I asked. "I never heard about any Belts."

"Yuh. The Van Allen Radiation Belts. They're doughnut-shaped zones of highly energetic charged particles trapped at high altitudes in the magnetic field of the Earth. Our boys woulda' been fried like KFC without the nano shields."

"Dude. What have you been smoking? High altitudes? Nano shields? We had nano back then?"

"Not exactly."

"What the heck are you talking about?" I asked, feeling a sense of something I could not put into words.

"Let me ask you this," J.Rod continued, cheerfully. "Do you really think that they flew all the way to the moon and then they just gave up?"

"No!" I exclaimed patriotically.

"Did you know that the Millennium Hotel is modeled on the proportions of the black Obelisk from 2001, A Space Oddity?" he asked.

When I hung up the phone I knew I had made one call too many. It happens, but this job seemed loaded with distractions and no solutions.

"Cut his head right clean off... Him and his wife"

Whuunk! Finally, after two days of searching, when out of desperation I was ready to call the photographer and, against every New York-loving bone in my body, beg him to ride first class to some other large metropolis, Vincent from the Port Authority called me out of the blue. He told me to try the most obvious place in the world: the Financial District downtown. Seems a friend of his had a good lead he thought he'd pass on. He gave me the name and address of the person I should ask for and told me that I needed to go in person because they don't take calls. I thanked him with a mixture of gratitude and regret. This job was starting to appear completely hopeless and I wasn't sure how much help my friendly "cinophile" would be. Besides, what kind of helipad doesn't take calls?

So, there I was. Over-committed to a job I would never be paid for unless I could find one of the few things New York City doesn't have. By the time my ghoulish friend Dan Burisch and I finally reached the top of the staircase, I was praying that this would have all the specs I needed: a flat, open, massive space with plenty of other buildings of varying height positioned all around and below it in a fairly anonymous array. Yeah right, I thought.

"We have to be careful up here," Dan said in a dry soft voice, as the pad started to come into view.

"Yeah. It's real windy up here," I noted as a chill spasmed up my spine. My face became gripped with an irrational smile, and I began to worry. It then occurred to me that it might have something to do with the fact that my pale security brother was aware of the need for caution. When someone who already appears dead says to be careful, it didn't seem irrational to be a little concerned. I took a deep breath and became calm.

"Just be quick and keep an eye out. This is a busy time of day," he stated, backing down the steps we had just climbed up.

"Will they close it down for a photo shoot?" I asked, focusing on the fact that this might be my only shot at finding what I was looking for.

"Don't you worry about that. We can make arrangements," I heard his voice say, though I was no longer aware of his presence.

As I stepped up onto the large grey platform, a massive gust of wind almost pushed me back down the steps, and then subsided. The wind ceased entirely. A sublime feeling of bliss fell upon me in the stillness.

And lo, a helipad! It appeared just as I had imagined, as if in a dream, before my weary scout eyes. Suddenly, a burst of energy flew up through my feet like juju. Grasping my camera, I nearly skipped and danced around from corner to corner, snapping away and taking compass readings. I think I may have actually twirled! Once. In fact, oddly, I couldn't recall ever being so happy in my entire life. There was even a nice, darkly painted circle outlined by thick white lines with other lines forming a cross, pin-pointing where to land. Everything seemed clear and perfect. I had found the impossible after the interminable. There is a God! I thought, truly amazed, and though some days He is called Allah, Buddha, the Matrix, Yahweh... on this day He was called Helipad.

