



# FORCE NO ONE

STORM CELL THRILLER #1

## **Quis Custodiet Ipsos Custodes?**

*Who will guard the guards themselves?*

*When in doubt, look for the fear.*

*Who is afraid of this man? Who is he afraid of?*

*What conditions or circumstances does he find troubling?*

*You must find the fear.*

*If there is no fear, you will have serious, persistent problems.*



## CHAPTER ONE

*If you know the enemy and know yourself,  
you need not fear the results of a hundred battles.*

Sun Tzu (Unknown-496 BC), Chinese philosopher

So, Joe, my friend, you owe me. You owe me, and you have been *dodging* me.” Xavier Cloud—Zave to his friends—had been looking for his friend for a long time, and he was often not a patient man.

The two men were isolated in an empty Detroit warehouse under the bright yellow cone provided by a shaded light. It hung from an industrial I-beam, a rafter thick with countless coats of institutional green paint. Translucent dust particles, random bits of asbestos, and traces of animal feces floated in the dirty beam.

In the distance, a summer storm birthed powerful rumbles as it drew closer.

“You were supposed to find me, weren’t you? And yet it was I who had to find you. I understand you don’t want to give me the briefcase. I understand the reasons why you have been a ghost for twelve years—all one hundred million of them. But your loyalties are divided, aren’t they, Joe? They need a tune-up. That’s why we’re old friends, bro. And friends don’t let friends screw up.”

He paused for a moment, making an allowance for their shared

history. There was a lot of it.

“Therefore ... *my friend* ... I am here to help you in the not screwing up part.”

Without a breeze to relieve the dank conditions in the space, the two men had dissolved into their shirts. One, however, sweated more vigorously than the other.

With seven feet of what the men used to call green Army tape around Joe’s mouth and head and another two rolls making him one, neck to ankles, with the chair he’d awakened in, Joe could hardly breathe. He had cause to sweat beyond the humidity.

Cloud sat in a creaky green metal office chair turned backwards, muscular arms crossed on the back of his perch. His sleeves were rolled up above the elbows to reveal a tattoo on his thick right forearm, a death’s head skull with a stiletto plunged into the right eye socket. The socket leaked a single teardrop of blood and the red-lipped skull was Joker-grinning like it had escaped from a Batman movie, the best one, with Jack Nicholson. Blackish text fading to old green in an arc under the Joker’s angular chin read *The Gutter Lilies*.

Joe sat immobile, one leg beginning to quiver, while Cloud regarded him. He chewed with an absent smile on the crust of a cheeseburger—mustard, no pickles—then pitched the burger fragment into the humid darkness. Unseen things scabbled after the food and trailed high-pitched squeaks as they ran away with it, fighting viciously.

“Joe, Joe,” Cloud said. He shook his head as if disappointed in a child, and rubbed his hands together to dislodge the greasy crumbs of his short dinner. Like you would do before going to work.

“Did you know I was a computer programmer at one time? Yeah, after *Desert Storm*, after I got out of the Army the first time, way before we knew each other.” He didn’t pause for an answer. “True story, systems analyst. Can you believe it? *Jee-zus*, I hated

that job. I enjoy the order, though, the logic of programming. Still do some development for my own amusement.”

Cloud smiled. He had Pentagon investigators chasing phantom Chinamen for months that time.

“But I just couldn’t stomach the *epic* idiots I worked with.”

He remembered how much wicked fun it was the day he finally quit. You jerk with the bull and you get the horns, dimmy. The building had been too damaged to reopen and the company quietly folded shortly thereafter.

Good times, man. Good times.

“I guess I wasn’t cut out to deal with civilian assholes. Army ones? Sure, maybe. At least there is some commonality of purpose, some generally shared mindset. Commitment, y’know? Honor. Civilians, pure ones, no military experience, they don’t have any of that. They chase after wealth without any sense of compassion. Crave power without accountability. Demand respect without earning it. And what the fuck is *gluten-free* all about, anyway? I believe you know these things.”

As bound up as he was, Joe nodded in agreement. It was hard to do under all the green Army tape.

“Civilian life is overrated and, apparently, it’s against the law to kill the assholes. I find that short-sighted. I was reenlisted by late ’99. Then 9/11 happened, and I was back in the show with you and our team.”

Cloud unconsciously rubbed his hand up and down his tattoo.

“Lost track of you when you got out, though. That wasn’t supposed to happen, was it? Twelve years you’ve been missing, man. I’m looking forward to catching up with you when all *this*”—he waved his hands in circles, fingers spread—“is over.”

Cloud paused.

“Maybe you saw my name in the news in recent years.” Joe’s eyes widened just a little. He had, and it frightened him.

“Yeah, well. Don’t believe everything you hear, and none of what you read.”

Cloud’s face hardened. “Civilian life was okay, just not my sense, as my Japanese friends say. But even bad experiences usually produce some valuable take-away, Joe, y’know? Some lesson that is learned if your mind is right. And I learned a valuable life lesson from working with computers. There are only two answers to every question, Joe: Yes, or no.”

Cloud heaved a reluctant sigh. The men had been friends a long time. Battle buddies. It shouldn’t have to go like this, but it is what it is. Just business.

“Well, listen,” he said, “can I getcha anything?” There was no reply. “Can I ask you one more time, please-*please* tell me where the case is? Then we’ll get you spruced up, forget all this bullshit ever happened and get a few beers. No harm, no foul, huh? The Tigers’ pennant game replay is on a big-screen down at the Hard Rock.”

There was no immediate reply, but Joe wasn’t born stupid and he did consider the last-ditch offer. This was an opportunity to avoid definite unpleasantness and restore an old friendship with the man, a friendship that would result in much hilarity, great food, many adult beverages and many adult females, among other consumables. You wanted the man to be your friend, because he was proven to be a damned good one. There were legendary reasons why you wanted him to be your friend much more than you wanted him to be your enemy.

Those had been proven, too.

But while it was apparent that Joe was in very serious trouble, he believed the equally sure consequences of surrendering information on the people who now possessed the silver Halliburton case with the combination lock were probably grimmer, even if he could give it up. That had been made clear to Joe when the Arabs tortured him to get the briefcase, weeks before.

Now his friend was doing the same thing his enemies had, for the same reason—but Joe really didn't know where the Arabs had gone with the case, which was unfortunate. But whatever happened tonight, Joe didn't believe his friend would kill him. Or what are friends for?

Joe finished his internal debate and presented a head tilt and shrug of his shoulders that telegraphed a negative reply.

“Okay then,” Cloud said. “You always were a tough bastard, weren'tcha? Y'know what, though?” He brightened and sat up straight in the chair. “We've been in tougher spots than this before, right? You and me?”

He stood and raised an imaginary M4 special operations carbine to his left shoulder and silently shook it a few times, as if firing on full auto. Lowering the invisible weapon, he looked down at Joe and smiled warmly.

“We've helped each other through some close calls before. And we'll get through this one together, too.”

Cloud raised his eyebrows and leaned slightly in, peering at his friend as if for affirmation. None was forthcoming. Cloud nodded his head once, businesslike, and began.

“There are only two things in life to worry about, Joe. See there? Ones and zeroes, yes or no. Either you are healthy, or you are sick. If you are healthy, there is nothing to worry about. But if you are sick, there are only two things to worry about: Either you get better, or you die.”

On a table next to Cloud's chair was an old ice pick and a new five-pound hammer. The ice pick was a classic and he picked it up carefully, suspended between his thumb and two fingers.

Through an opening in the cinder block wall where a window used to be, peals of thunder and strobes of lightning crawled closer.

Weathered, stained and rusty, the ice pick hadn't been used to pick ice since Cloud's father had driven a milk route in the 1960s. Cloud kept it as a warmhearted souvenir of those days when he jumped from his dad's boxy, slope-nosed Divco milk truck as a boy, and double-timed a wire rack of clanky glass milk bottles, or orange juice or butter, to an unpainted metal box lined with cork on a porch or to a built-in milk chute, like some of the houses had.

He'd swap the full containers for the empties and run back to the truck. Every single trip his father would say, "Good job, mister!" and smile warmly at his boy. Every single trip.

Their second-hand milk truck in those days wasn't refrigerated. The milk and other products were kept fresh with angular blocks of crystal-clear ice the size of beer kegs. It was the boy's job to use his ice pick to dismantle the blocks and distribute the fragments over the dairy products so that nothing spoiled or was delivered to a customer warm.

The boy knew taking care of people was what kept the milk route alive, even as big grocery chains built their soulless superstores on every other block, the bastards.

As golden sun streaked the heavens above Norman Rockwell streets, the faded creamy yellow-and-green milk truck would trundle back to the dairy. The cranky diesel engine, happy at last, purred its approval. The last of the ice dissolved to water and left drippy wet trails, like memories, on the road.

Xavier Cloud's father would reach out and clamp a giant's right hand on his boy's shoulder. He would give it a strong squeeze and say with honest sincerity, "Thank you, son. *Thank you* for helping me today."

The boy would beam with pride in himself, in his work, and with an abiding love for his father. On chilly mornings, they would sip pungent, unsweetened coffee poured into a dented aluminum Thermos-bottle cup and agree not to tell his mother, their little

secret, fun and only for the boys.

“Good and black,” his father would say with his big grin, hoisting the battered cup in their regular toast, “just as God and the U.S. Navy intended.”

It was a glorious time, every precious moment. The worst day he’d ever had on that milk truck had been great. Those were the days, man, those were really the days. But those days were long gone.

The milk route died out in time. Soon after, the boy’s father died along with it. Life was unfair, but death was a bitch. This was a life lesson Cloud had reinforced many times in life, though he often thought calling it a “life” lesson was a contradiction in terms.



Unlike the ice pick, the hammer possessed no such golden glow. It was a spanking new Stanley Anti-Vibe 24 you could buy at Lowe’s or Sears for a reasonable price. It was durable tool, with a wide head, a robust steel shank and a grippy, rubber-clad handle.

Some wretched workmen in a smoky Taiwanese factory somewhere probably churned them out hundreds or even thousands per day, but so what? A nice tool was a nice tool. The hammer gleamed in the dim light in stark contrast to the rusty ice pick, but not all the dark red stains on the ice pick were rust.

“So, Joe, see, if you’re sick and you get better,” Cloud continued, “there is nothing to worry about. But if you die, there are two things to worry about: Either you go to Heaven, or you go to Hell.”

Cloud slowly rolled the ice pick back and forth in his right hand and that wry smile creased his face one more time. How might have things gone differently in life, he thought once again, if his father had lived, if his lonely mother hadn’t rebounded and married that abusive prick?

Well, that little love-nest deal hadn’t ended very well for old



step dad, had it?

Cloud picked up the hammer and positioned the ice pick just above Joe's left kneecap. He moved it around his friend's pressed and creased blue jeans until he found the location he was looking for, the quadriceps tendon at the top of the patella. From there it was a straight shot into the marrow of the tibia.

Joe's eyes got big and watery then. The lower half of his face was so wrapped in the green tape that he could scarcely get much air through his nose, let alone cry out. That was going to be a cast-iron bitch when it came off his beard. Joe was as scared as a helpless man can be, especially a big man used to being in complete control.

A man who would do this same thing to someone else.

In last-ditch panic, Joe sucked in a deep, watery breath through his runny nose and bore down with all his might, grunting and flexing his big upper body to try and break the tape holding him.

Cloud sat back a few inches and waited, picturing cartoon steam jets shooting out of Joe's ears to the sound of a Loony Tunes train whistle. But Joe's effort to break free, as they both knew it would be, was momentary. And futile.

A wet stain smelling strongly of ammonia, body-building supplements, and inevitability spread in the crotch of Joe's jeans. If Joe's sweat-soaked right sleeve had been rolled up, it would have revealed a death's head skull with a stiletto plunged into the right eye socket. The socket leaked a single teardrop of blood and the red-lipped skull was Joker-grinning like it had escaped from a Batman movie, the best one, with Jack Nicholson.

Blackish text fading to old green in an arc under the Joker's angular chin read *The Gutter Lilies*, but it was hard to discern under Joe's dark skin, so Joe'd had the letters scarred in. That effect had raised them so well above the skin that Stevie Wonder could read them.

Cloud held the hammer at about half-choke for accuracy. This

was a soft spot in the flesh and required little real force, but he couldn't jab like he used to before the stinging carpal tunnel set in. He raised the hammer over the ice pick on his friend's kneecap until it was even with his black shark's eyes, fixing the sight picture just as he once did with a rifle aimed at bad guys.

"If you go to Heaven, Joe, there's nothing to worry about." He took a steadying breath, and exhaled.

Outside, the storm that had been threatening all evening let loose a monstrous thunderclap that shook dust from the building.

"But Joe, man, if you go to *Hell* ..."