

CLOUD 10



By: Jason Meller

“It is better to conquer yourself than to win a thousand battles. Then the victory is yours. It cannot be taken from you, not by angels or by demons, heaven or hell.”

- Buddha

PROLOGUE

It must have been past one in the morning, but John did not know for sure. The clock in his outdated Honda Civic had stopped working again. Eyeballing the building from afar, he began to rub his hands together in an attempt to keep warm, as he shifted his body anxiously in the driver's seat. He had been sitting inside the car long enough now that each time he took a breath, it appeared as if he was exhaling after a pull from a cigarette. Summoning up the courage, he unfastened his seatbelt, reached inside his jacket pocket and pulled out his cell to review the text he had received two hours earlier.

374 Redmond Street. Apt #1127

The building he had been instructed to visit stood centre stage in a triplex of concrete towers, across the street from the vacant lot where he was now parked. Long ago, the tall gray building might have been praised for its cutting-edge architecture, now however, it wasn't much to look at. Like most of the other neighboring apartment complexes, with its worn bricks and cluttered and dilapidated balconies, it offered little in comparison to the sleeker pastel, glass high-rises that now lined the city's skyline. "What the hell am I doing here?" he cursed to himself, as his temperament abruptly shifted from apprehension to anger. Deep down he wanted nothing more than to flee from the arrangement he had accepted, but he knew running away from his situation was no longer an option.

Returning the phone to his jacket pocket, John got out of his car. Instinctively, he began surveying his surroundings like a Navy Seal on a secret operative, as he made his way across the deserted intersection until he reached the building's property border. The

outside temperature was barely above freezing, and yet warm beads of sweat were quickly pooling across his forehead, drenching over his confidence like a runaway straw hut caught in a mighty monsoon. "Relax," he told himself again, for what seemed like the hundredth time tonight. "It's just a job." He knew he needed to suppress his anxiety, or at the very least *appear* confident in front of *them*. He was sure the men he was dealing with were not fools. They would be able to spot an amateur a mile away. He detested feeling like this, left to their mercy. Then again, didn't he have the right to feel apprehensive, even scared, after all he had been through over the last few weeks? But what worried him most was that tonight he was facing *them* on their home turf, where *they* would have the power to control proceedings and dictate events at their leisure. He craved the warm security of daylight at this moment. Instead, he was left to face them trapped under the chilling darkness of night, which was more than capable of cursing his own destructive imagination to the farthest depths of hell.

Arriving at the foot of the building, John hurried up the cement staircase until he stood in front of a crude brick archway that appeared to almost hover over the main entrance way. Great, he thought. He *had* officially reached the gates of hell. Entering through the first set of doors, his eyes quickly zeroed onto the glass partition that guarded a second set of doors. It had been badly shattered, looking as if a spider had spun a web neatly within its thick reinforced wired pane. And then like the blow that had shattered the glass, it hit him. How was he going to enter to the building? He did not have a key or any type of code that would grant him access. He certainly wasn't about to call upstairs and ask to be invited in. That would be suicide. John waited for a moment. Then unsure of what else to do, he took hold of the cold steel handle with both hands and gave a sharp yank, only to have the damaged door swing open with relative ease.

And while he knew the lock had already been compromised, John felt as if he could have won the tug of war with all the adrenaline that was celebrating merrily inside him. Naively, a smile spread over his face. This temporary illusion of might had given him a heavy injection of confidence as he envisioned how his newfound strength might prove useful before the night was over. But this quick dose of euphoria would be short lived, and like most chemically-induced highs, the trip back to reality was like a smack in the face. His smile vanished as quickly as it had arrived. He was not a fighter and he knew it.

With an edge of caution in his step, John entered the lobby, keeping his head down, not unlike a young child on their first day of school, still not comfortable with his new surroundings. Already he could feel the rhythm of his heart reaching an alarming crescendo as he went in search for the elevator. "Come on, John," he tried reassuring himself again. Frank had assured him that his job would be a simple one. "In and out. Easy money kid," he had been told during their meeting. But the more he tried to corral his runaway thoughts, the more he worried. If this job was going to be so "easy", then why had he been paid a thousand dollars? He tried to convince himself that the people he was dealing with were simply too busy to worry about simple jobs like this one, and that healthy payoffs were merely insurance for a job well done. It was 'all a part of doing business', he thought. The problem was this was not John's everyday business.

The lobby was dull and empty. The floor was covered with a lime green tile that intersected with a seventies floral rug that channeled in either direction along the length of the adjacent hallway. There was also a small front room that hosted two mismatched chairs that were positioned against the far wall. As John waited for the elevator, his eyes fell upon a lone man browsing through a newspaper. How had he not seen the man before? Had he been there

all along? John tried to look casual, but he was finding it increasingly difficult to stop from fidgeting. And although it seemed that the man was quietly minding his own business, taking little notice of his presence, John's mind continued to race. Could this man have been sent to spy on him? Sent to ensure that he followed everything according to plan? "Don't be stupid," John told himself. "You've been watching too many movies." But before John could make up his mind, his train of thought was suddenly interrupted by the painful grinding sound of the elevator doors opening.

"Are you coming up or what, buddy?" A dispirited voice said from within the confines of the elevator. John regained his senses and stepped inside the steel box, being careful to keep his distance.

The man beside him was disturbingly tall, bearded and grossly overweight and probably in his mid-forties. His hair was jet black, greasy, and parted sharply down the middle, looking like he had just climbed out of a swimming pool. Dressed in pair of stained jogging pants, he was wearing an outdated white T-shirt featuring a giant lemon yellow happy face. Except unlike most other editions from collection that had not been in vogue since the nineteen eighties, the face on the front of the man's T-shirt had a single gunshot blasted into the middle of the forehead, completed with a thick trail of bright red blood that dripped down from the wound, like lava oozing out of a volcano. How fitting, John thought.

As the elevator ascended, John could feel the perched eyes of his cellmate fixed on him like a circling hawk stalking its prey from above. John tried his best to appear natural, but the harder he tried, the more awkward he felt. The odour of the man didn't help matters any, smelling as if he showered less often than he shaved.

How could he expect to look confident for his impending rendez-vous on the eleventh floor if he could barely compose himself in the presence of a few casual bystanders? “Why should I be worried?” He thought. After all John did not look out of place, dressed in a navy blue jacket and sporting a pinstriped New York Yankees baseball cap. He looked like the model tenant for the apartment building. John was also very close to average height and weight and didn’t have any noticeable scars or blemishes that would cause him to stand out in a crowd.

“Cold as shit outside, eh?”

“What?” John responded, caught off guard by the question.

“Sure is cold outside - isn’t it?” The stranger stressed again, making sure he would not have to repeat himself a third time.

“Oh yeah,” John answered haphazardly, although he had barely noticed the outside conditions. Why was he so nervous? He had lived in similar accommodations during his years at university. He hated to think of himself as soft. He had been around hard asses before and had always been able to handle himself. Why should tonight be any different? But he knew in the past that he had always had the support of others. Friends like Chris he could rely on to back him up if he ever got in over his head. Tonight however, he was on his own.

“Hurry up,” John fretted. He could feel his insides doing somersaults, as his fragile nerves continued to churn deeper into the pit of his stomach. “Come on!” John growled to himself, nearly out loud, glaring at the flashing console above him, as if warning them to hurry up with their little sequential lightshow. Finally, the elevator stopped at the eleventh floor and the steel doors swung open again. This time John exited the elevator much quicker than he had entered.

With Christmas only a few weeks away, many of the apartments had some sort of wreath or holiday ornament hanging from their door. Unit 1127, the last apartment at the very end of the hallway, was devoid of any decoration. Not even a simple doorknocker hung to greet impending visitors.

Once again John pulled out his phone to confirm his instructions, when he heard what sounded like the faint click of a dead bolt being unlocked behind him. Then he recognized a second distinct click, realizing the neighboring door had once again been secured. He was puzzled. Why had the tenant not come out of their apartment? Had they been scared off by his intruding presence? This was all getting to be too much for him to handle. What the hell had he gotten himself into? He was feeling nauseous and might be sick right where he stood. Frantically, he put his hands over his face, shutting his eyes for a moment, as he attempted to stop the hallway from spinning around him, hoping that when he opened them again, that he would be able to wake up from this nightmare he was living. But as expected, when he removed his hands, he was not at home safe in his bed. Instead, he was still trapped inside his own distorted Wonderland. And unlike Alice peering through the looking glass fascinated with curiosity, he was the caged attraction for others to marvel at through their own private apartment peepholes.

John quickly pulled the bill of his cap further down over his eyes, leaving only the bridge of his nose exposed. Should he have worn some sort of a disguise? What if something were to go wrong? His identity could be exposed. "Alright John, calm down. Let's not get carried away," he gasped, figuring there was no sense getting any more worked up than he already was. He realized there was nothing more he could do to improve his current predicament. "Just go about your business and everything will be fine. The longer you stand outside this apartment, the

more suspicious you'll look to anyone who cares to notice." He understood it was time to carry out what he had come here to do.

Exhaling, John knocked three times on the solid wooden door. Thump. Thump. Thump! No answer. Again he knocked. Thump. Thump. Did he have the wrong apartment, or even the wrong building altogether? He checked his phone a third time to verify the address. This was the right apartment, but this was certainly not the way he had envisioned things would unfold.

Distraught, John hopelessly knocked again. More than another minute passed this time and still no answer. What the hell was going on? This was supposed to be a "simple task" - one where everything was supposed to have gone according to plan. He had absolutely no idea how to proceed. All he had was the cell number of the mutual acquaintance who had arranged his original meeting with Frank. He had not been given any instructions or any alternative course of action in case there were any difficulties.

On the outset, his concerns had been derived mostly out of caution. Now his heart was thundering away like a mighty galloping thoroughbred rounding the final turn, as his initial apprehension was quickly developing into something much more real - *fear*. This realization had John's mind racing neck and neck with the thumping rhythm of his heartbeat, as he tried to come to terms with the very *real* predicament he was in. He had been asked to do "a simple task", one he thought would make his life a whole lot easier. Now he would have to go back and tell them he had failed.