

Present Day

Joplin, Missouri

August 9, 2019

4:15 p.m.

“I ain’t crazy...that X-86 crap’ll worm through ya in a mighty fine way. Wish I had some of it now.” The old bum cackled, fingering his mangy gray beard.

“Mister, X-86 has been outta the atmosphere for damn near a decade. Try again.” Dusty Morris, a soft heart on most occasions, wanted to ditch his southern hospitality and drop-kick the anorexic Santa through the interrogation window. He didn’t know if Pops suffered some latent affects somehow, but the old man seemed a filament short of a light bulb.

“You say.” The bum grinned, revealing strangely straight white teeth. He reeked of sweat, cigarettes, and stale coffee – his threadbare clothes varying shades of grimy.

“Yeah, I say,” Dusty countered, then crossed his arms. I ain’t buyin’ your play, Gramps.

A sinister smile spread across the bum’s face. Since the X-86 apocalypse in 2008, a rare percentage of survivors still suffered the debilitating side effects...and many had honed the gift of thought-speech, of venturing into each other’s brains for a little mental conversation.

Ninety-eight percent of *us died, but things are better now, and* –

“HA! Better? This life sucks!” the bum wailed, making Dusty jump.

You readin' my thought-speech, old man? But Dusty said nothing, suddenly conscious of clearing his mind.

The bum grinned, a maniacal expression that revealed a dentist-cared-for smile. "You're fuzzy," he grunted.

A shiver slinked down Dusty's spine. "Most tell me they can't tune in to my frequency...you must be good. So why don't you fill me in, pops. I can't read you at all...name, motive, anything. You say you did it, and I believe ya. But we've forgotten how to do this." He narrowed his eyes, disguising his thoughts as best he could. The first damn murder in a decade, and it had to happen here, to such a close friend.

The familiar vacuum sucked at his insides every time he drifted to the image of the blood, of Jessie, three miles away and sound asleep, bolting upright in bed screaming, *MAKE HIM STOP! MAKE HIM STOP! MAKE HIM STOP!* They woke the teenager and assured her nobody was hurting her, but Dusty knew that was never true when someone Jessie Bayker loved suffered for even a moment.

What he really wanted to do was throw the man off the roof. If Gramps was the murderer, then some immediate justice would ease the state's burden. Anything to put an end to this flaw, this screw-up, Dusty's most colossal failure.

"I ain't a failure," the bum snarled, wiping away spittle with the back of his weathered hand. The ripped Cardinals T-shirt revealed toned muscles. They'd found him cowering behind the Office Max, bloody jacket and all, screaming, *I saved us from an encore! I did it for all of us...arrest me!*

The investigative team had matched the DNA within hours of picking him up, and the region buzzed with an unfamiliar thirst for vindication. It wasn't so much that there had been a murder but because of *who* had been murdered.

“So fill me in, Pops. This is the first homicide since the last of the uprising in ’09, and of all people to kill.” Dusty quelled the surge of emotion. He couldn’t deal with the loss now, not until he had answers. “What’d you mean about an encore?” He sat back and laced his hands behind his head. Despite the mild August heat, his joints ached. Arthritis is a bitch, he kept griping to Melanie. She only smiled while massaging cream on his shoulders every night. He was young for arthritis, not fifty until January, but the past ten years had aged them in ways time couldn’t measure.

The clock ticked. Dusty waited for a response, for some sign that the blades had edges, but after a maddening two minutes, he added, “This’d be easier if I knew your name.”

“Folks used to call me sir, but Pops works for me.” He grinned again, displaying the too-clean teeth. They’d assumed the man was homeless – wild hair, tattered clothes, and nose-crinkling stench. But that smile didn’t sit right with Dusty.

“So, Pops, why’d you do it? You still admit you did it, right?” Dusty remained aloof, leaning back, remembering what they’d taught him about mind control.

Jessie told him to imagine himself floating on an ocean – crystal blue water beneath him, cloudless blue sky above him. A wave of calm washed over him just thinking about it.

“Sure.”

“Man of few words...okay.” Dusty jotted gibberish on the tablet. “How old you are, Pops?” He didn’t look up.

“Too old to give a shit,” Pops spat, his tone different. Less rural? “And you ain’t keepin’ me out, just so you know.”

Not rural...southern... Dusty jotted that note on the yellow tablet, purposely letting the notion – and his thought-speech – linger in the open air.

He looked up and held Pops' gaze. "Okay, fair enough. It's irrelevant anyway. His blood is on your jacket, and you confessed when the officer picked you up. I did it for all of us, I believe you said."

"So?" This time, Pops tilted his head, a glimpse of the real man peeking out from the mangy hair.

You're not so old and out of it, are you? Lines around the eyes might be more from sun squinting than age, and the mass of gray-flecked dark hair hung everywhere – from his head, his beard, even dangling from his moustache over his lips. He resembled old reggae singers with dread locks. Some evidence of bad acne showed through the thinner part of his beard, but the cold blue eyes were clear, not X-86 tainted at all.

Maybe some people just need chaos... what's your chaos, Pops? He stared at the derelict, who suddenly broke into a wide grin.

"The Movement."

A sizzling sensation roped its way through Dusty's insides. "The Movement was your chaos?"

"Yep." Pops leaned back in his chair, crossed his arms, and closed his eyes.

"Isn't that the white supremacist Kingsville cult?" Now we're gettin' somewhere.

"Yep," Pops whispered.

Dusty narrowed his eyes. "Let's back up." He had no confrontation in his voice. "Why'd you kill him?" Prickles of anxiety made him jitter with apprehension. Answer me, dammit!

A flitting memory of Tattoo Boy, a long-lost demon, danced down his spine.

Pops opened his eyes to smile at Dusty, then his gaze drifted to ceiling. "I did it to save him... I had to." He cocked his head, almost as if remembering, then closed his eyes again.

"You had to? Why? What the hell is all this cryptic bullshit?" Dusty smacked the table, hoping to make Pops jump.

He didn't, but a flash of anger flitted across his face. Pops glared at Dusty, and then his expression went slack, and the crystal clear eyes disconnected. For a split second, Dusty was positive it was all an act, but nothing he did got a reaction. Pissed, tired, and hungry, Dusty got up and slammed his chair to the floor, then banged the door shut behind him.

No one in the observation room heard the bum mumble, "It's my fault...all my fault..."

Before

Kingsville, Texas
May 1983

DON'T LOOK YET...five more minutes. But Bev couldn't stand it, and headed to the hotel window again.

If they intended to kill her, she wished they'd hurry up and do it. The sooner she knew, the sooner she could either get used to life on the lam or be done with it once and for all. A brutal, agonizing death would be better than being dragged back to the hell they'd left in Kingsville, Texas. To hell with messing with it, Bev wanted to blow up the whole damn Lone Star state.

Nothing scared her more than being hunted, a pawn in Tommy Witherington's power play. The whole damn Movement could kiss her ass, and Tommy the first to pucker up.

She peeked out the drapes without moving them. The Kings Inn parking lot looked the same as it had the last thirty or forty times. Exasperated, she fumbled with the Marlboro Light package. Her hand trembled as she lit one and took a deep drag, inhaled slowly, and waited for the buzz she remembered so well. Instead, she burst into a fit of coughs, scrambled to the sink, and took frantic slurps of water.

"I think that's why you quit ten years ago." James cocked an eyebrow, a slight smile dancing at the corners of his mouth. His dark hair was a mess. Even on the run, he was as ruggedly good looking as ever, lounging on the Kings Inn bed with Charlie at his side. Their six-year old son mirrored James, lying on his back propped against pillows, knees bent to provide a support for his comic book. Every time his dad resituated, Charlie did the same.

"No, I quit because I couldn't afford college tuition and my habit." She coughed again. "But I'm being nervous for both of us." She wiped her face, frowned at him, and traipsed back to the

hotel curtains. She had mastered the don't-touch-the-drapes peek, hair at attention on the nape of her neck.

Something thudded next door.

“What was that?” Bev froze. “They’re listening. I swear, they’re over there. James...” She took a step toward her husband, who’d sat up. Her heart hammered, about to explode in her chest. “Do something,” she hissed.

Adrenaline pulsed through her as she followed James to the door. He peered through the peephole, turned and shook his head.

A solid whop against the wall by the TV sent a zip of fear through her. Hurry! she wanted to scream, but terror had a fist around her throat. Even James jumped.

She hurried between the beds, ordered Charlie to get to the bathroom, and grabbed each of her ten-month-old twin daughters. “Go!” she whisper-shouted to Charlie, nearly running him over to get to the bathroom.

“Sit still and don’t make a sound, Charlie, do you hear me?” She wedged him between the toilet and the tub. He cowered with Jamie in his lap and Jennifer on a towel next to him, his Astros ball cap pulled low over his green eyes.

“Try to keep the girls quiet.” She kissed his forehead, took only a second glance back at them before closing the door. “Go,” she barked at James, then raked a hand through her frazzled auburn hair. When he opened the door, she heard an engine rev.

Her heart surged with it. Somewhere in the distance – near where they’d hidden their car maybe? – a siren whooped. The bright sun streamed into their room as James took a hesitant step onto the sidewalk in front of their ground floor hotel room. Another thump next door yanked her last string. Completely untethered, Bev sprinted to the window while James slinked around the parking lot and the cars.

Bev trembled, clutching the drapes, unable to stand still as continual thuds next door had her

on the verge of screaming. Too frantic to maintain any modicum of couth, she slipped outside and rapped her knuckles on room nine's door.

Voices, more ruckus, the chain sliding...

"Yes?" A woman about Bev's age, maybe not quite thirty but haggard enough to look it, raised her eyebrows, then shushed a child tugging on her arm.

"I'm sorry...are you, um, are you working for Tommy? I mean, is your husband with you?" Bev's voice hitched, panic now like an exposed wire near a streaming pool of water.

"I beg your pardon? My husband just ran to the store, and the kids...are my kids making too much racket, is that it?" The woman's Yankee accent, not a native Arkansan or Kingsvillian, by any stretch.

"Bev? What're you doing?" James swooped an arm around her, apologized to the lady, and pushed his wife into unlucky room number seven. "Are you nuts?"

"We'll be quieter...I'm sorry!" The woman called out, then closed her door and threw the deadbolt.

"She knows something, James. Didn't you see it on her face? My God, how could you not see it?" Bev yanked her arm free, pulled the drapes aside, and studied the parking lot.

"Bev...look at me." James turned her, held her face in his hands, and brushed her bangs aside. "They're not out there, do you hear me? That woman's got like three kids in there going crazy. But she's not with Tommy. It was obvious they're on vacation. You're going to have to get a grip."

"But...but...he's watching. I just know it." Her voice shook, tears making it hard to talk, to breathe, to hold off the panic.

"No, honey, he's not. If Tommy were out there..." He pointed at the now closed door. "He'd be in here. He's all about brute force, in-your-face action now. It's the badge, and it's why we ran, remember?"

Yes...I remember. The threat, the phone call, the “accidental” meeting at the grocery store. He’s got James on the brain...

“Bev, snap out of it. Get Charlie and the girls, let’s get some sleep, and when the sun goes down, we’ll bust ass north. Okay?” He caressed her face again, but his firm hold did little to comfort her.

She shivered as she pulled away from her husband and marched into the bathroom. “C’mon, Charlie, come on out, sweetie.” She lifted Jamie off of his lap, and he scrambled to his feet.

“What’d I do? How come I had to stay in the bathroom? What’s wrong, Mom? Am I in trouble?” Charlie’s eyes were deer-in-the-headlights wide. The look of anguish on his face tugged at Bev, sickened her.

“No, baby.” She reached for him, but he flinched. Her insides fluttered and her hands trembled as they hovered in mid-air. Her frown faltered, threatened to turn into tears. “Charlie, honey, momma’s here. C’mere.” She scooped him into her arms, and he let her, but she felt his body stiffen slightly. A wave of anger filled her, starting in her womb.

Grow up and quit your damn whining! But the instant she succumbed to the fury, a massive wall of guilt smacked her upright.

She swallowed, caressed her son, and led him to the empty bed. James frowned, rubbed his forehead like he always did when he intended to save the planet, so she pasted on a smile to convince him she was okay. *I can’t take any superhero crap right now, James. Not all of us can be you.*

She grimaced. Bitterness wasn’t her style, but damn if her head didn’t hurt. Her husband must have been convinced, because he tucked Charlie in, kissed their son’s forehead, then wrapped his arms around her.

The impact of it hit her as a wall of emotion made it hard to breathe. She bawled, heaving sobs as James held her. “Shhh, it’s okay, baby,” he whispered.

She wanted to argue, to insist he prove it. Instead, he kissed her tear-covered cheeks when she finally stopped crying, then eased her onto the bed next to Charlie. He nestled Jamie between them, then lay Jennifer on the other side of Charlie. He turned off the lamp, found both pacifiers and stuffed them in each infant's mouth, then plopped onto the other bed.

"I love you," she whispered, watching him and wondering what she would do without him. The tears had stopped, but the lump in her throat could give way at any minute. She wanted to be strong – like James – but the weight of the challenge was crushing.

"I love you, honey. Now get some sleep." He picked up his Wambaugh book and pretended to read.

She knew better. The line between his eyes meant he was still worried, and if James was worried, sleep might as well have stayed in Texas. She rehashed their catalyst instead. The election had spurred the idea, but the picnic – that had been the fourth down, third strike, and fifth foul rolled into one.