

***“Sometimes even to live is an act of courage.”***

— Lucius Annaeus Seneca

## I.

*This house has history.*

Everything about Xavier Aguilar’s hoaried, two-story American Foursquare screamed history. The brick frames were old, but the foundation incredibly sturdy. The home wasn’t occupied when he, his wife, and his daughter came upon it, but the innumerable amount of photographs that were nestled within the sleeves of thick books or hung in lavish frames told enough of the Paisley’s story for Xavi to understand that they were a happy couple. They lived a long, happy life filled with memories they wanted to cherish forever. They planned on retiring here and dying peacefully.

They certainly did die here.

But it wasn’t peaceful.

No one really gets that pleasure anymore.

The couple was quite old-fashioned as far as he could tell. The woman’s name was Anabelle Paisley, while her husband’s was Andrew. Once Xavi moved into their house and went through all of the couple’s possessions, it was almost as if they had been personal friends of his. He knew so much about them, likely more than their real friends did.

*History.*

The world changed a lot over the past few years. It’d been about a decade, give or take a few years, since the internal infrastructure of the entire world fell apart. Maybe more. No one was really sure anymore. Some of his neighbors, he knew, always tried to keep track of time. From what he’d heard, they did this to make sure things were as normal as they possibly could, but it was tough with so much time *lost*. With surviving a priority, the ever-changing calendar fell way down the totem pole of things to remember and keep track of. Time stayed, but days didn’t. Not many people were sure of the year anymore.

Climate allowed Xavi to guess the months. But whether it was the 16<sup>th</sup> day or the 31<sup>st</sup> day of that month, why the hell would that even matter? It felt silly to think that it ever did. Of all of the pressing matters in their society, keeping track of the days, weeks, and hours felt so superfluous in comparison to the rest of their needs. He thought of it as prioritizing.

Internet. What a relic of a distant past. There is no big government structure anymore. The media stayed for a while, trying to make sense of the chaos, but eventually they went on radio silence too. It was almost as if they all vanished in thin air, leaving the little guys like Xavi to make sense of the mess on their own. He always joked that maybe all of the politicians and reporters and celebrities of the world went on vacation together to some islands in the Pacific, where everything was alright. Boy, Xavi sure wished he had an island to flee to.

He remembered waiting for his wife, Kate, to return home to Indiana from a conference in Vegas in the initial chaos. She was on board her plane home, and it landed miraculously. The pair

took their young daughter Darla and fled. They kept each other safe, traveling for a couple years until they finally stumbled on Glenley. Darla was the cutest thing ever; she was a baby when everything fell apart so she never knew of the world before the Plague hit. She was her mother's child, that was for sure. Her hair was raven black, with big brown eyes and empathy and human understanding like Xavi had never seen. She was extraordinary, and he missed her dearly.

Glenley was a nice country bumpkin town in what was once called Kentucky, a small farming and mining community of only a couple miles distance. Around twenty to thirty houses situated themselves around a large farm, and its tiny version of a 'main street' or downtown area consisted of a few resident-owned businesses and a single diner. Not a fast food restaurant in sight. Those corporations knew better than to try to step foot into Glenley. The sheriffs kept things together. Smaller government and hierarchy was easier to keep together in times like these.

The small communities are a lot quicker to band together, and a lot more efficiently. They built and powered an electric fence around their borders, shielded themselves off, and stayed prepared for any future conflict. Conflict between communities was common these days, but the folks at Glenley liked to keep things friendly with their neighbors.

Glenley took in the Aguilar, and Xavi especially was eternally grateful. Apparently, the old homeowners died in the early days and no one was very familiar with them, anyway.

The sheriffs were happy to let the Aguilar settle in, enroll Darla into grade school, return Kate to hospital work as one of the town's primary doctors, and have Xavi join the deputies in community protection. They owed this little town everything, but in a twisted form of irony, this little town felt it went the other way.

Darla was a sore spot for Xavi. A stranger showed up at the gates a month or so after moving in. He was sick. They lost a few people inside the gates since he wasn't checked and he ended up passing it along to the others, including their daughter. One person's stupid mistake led to the deaths of a lot of people. It was the most awful thing Xavi ever bore in his life, and even thinking about it now, he wondered how he managed to escape the horror of losing his Darla.

Xavi and Kate could not bear the weight of the tragedy and it ripped them apart.

There was nothing wrong with Kate. In fact, she and Xavi made an excellent-looking couple. Kate was always the more lively and energetic of the two; she was like an open book, never liking to shut out herself from the world, or other people from herself. The dichotomy between them worked in their initial attraction, it even worked throughout the majority of their marriage. But the differences in how they mourned--Xavi brooding and introverted, Kate trying to smile through the pain and share her feelings at every possible point--is where the line was drawn and their relationship ended.

Xavier Aguilar stood at a respectable five foot eleven, but he always felt a lot smaller than he really was. His shirt tucked in, khaki pants pulled up to the hips, Xavi was the type to ensure perfection and uniformity in his actions at all cost. With his black hair short and cut into a faux mohawk, Xavi had boyish-good looks but did not give off an intimidating or attention-grabbing vibe that someone in his position should have. He was much older than he looked, too. His stooped

figure held a self-deprecating posture reeking of low confidence, a man undeniably and eternally subservient in behavior.

Every morning Xavi lay in his (formerly the Paisleys') bed, usually around half-past five, he reminisced about old times. Nostalgia ate at his brain, and he knew he wasn't the only one. brought in a case full of old magazines he had collected. The most recently-printed of the stack were dated over twenty ago – not very long ago in the grand scheme of history - but for everyone in Glenley, those times of celebrity gossip and TV programming felt like a lifetime ago.

One article in particular referenced ticket sales for a concert played by a little band called "The Rolling Stones" – a name Xavi hadn't heard in a long time. But it lit a fire in him that left him forever ago--a fire that crackled with the words *War, children, yeah, it's just a shot away.*

There was something about that line in the song that was so memorable for Xavi, he recalled going to a concert of theirs once back when he was a lot younger, but he could not pinpoint the significance of that line or why it stuck out to him in this moment. Maybe he'd recall its relevance again someday.

That song followed him throughout the day. It haunted him, poked and prodded at his brain, a true test of his memory... He was proud by the end of his patrols that day, as he managed to remember the general beat to the song, whistling along to it during his car ride home. When Xavi returned to his humble abode, he rifled through the collection of albums the old homeowners left behind, but nothing from The Rolling Stones. Rock was not a genre he assumed the Paisleys were accustomed to. He was surprised, but he was thankful.

*Probably thought of it as the Devil's music,* he always thought to himself mockingly, reflecting on all of the home's religious imagery and paraphernalia. The Devil... such a silly concept. Red horns, a pitchfork and a master manipulator? No.

Xavi was convinced he'd seen real devils already and they were nothing like that.

By the time he stopped reminiscing and climbed out of bed, got himself dressed, and made his way down the steps, he glanced at the clock sitting on the wall above the dining table... It was after seven. It seemed to send a jolt through his body. He had to get on patrol by the next half-hour. He felt relieved that he was lucky enough to climb out of bed when he did.

Xavi hated to admit that he enjoyed the solitary life. It was a freedom he never had. It was his time to heal himself. He hoped that one day, just maybe, he and Kate could patch things up. She seemed to have already thrown in the towel and understood that their relationship, no matter how tough it was and long-lasting, would never be repaired. After Darla died, there was nothing to glue them together. He was a mess when he lost his daughter, and pushed Kate away. But she was so forgiving, and didn't blame him for it. It was a mutual split. Maybe "patch things up" isn't the best way to word it. Completely rebuild, more like it. Start over with a fresh foundation and a fresh frame of mind. Though he never expected it would even happen, Xavi accepted it as more of an ideal fantasy than any sort of feasible plan for the future.

As he felt his mind wander back to a place of deep guilt and regret, he rubbed his temples. It was therapeutic in a way – as if akin to stick to stick igniting a fire, rubbing flesh to flesh would do

the same for his mind and heart, burning away all of the negativity he carried. Getting up and preparing his coffee, he realized that the minutes clambered away so quickly from him. He didn't realize it was already almost time for work. Finishing his cup of joe with unhealthy speed, Xavi pulled on some clothes, brushed his hair as best as he possibly could, and then made his exit from the house.

His drive to the police station was silent, per usual. The only radio station available was broadcast from within the city. On her off time, Kate co-hosted. He knew she was at work at this point, so he'd hear nothing but static if he turned the radio on. Kate saw the need to provide the town with some sense of normality. Glenley seemed to love it. People tuned in to hear her banter with her co-host Newt, a twenty-something skater boy. Xavi always liked that about Kate: She was always so genuine, so caring for others and their needs, whether it was physically or even just having the emotional comfort of turning on the radio and hearing voices talk and have fun and play old music again.

The selection was limited to whatever music they had access to. The whole town came together and donated a ton of old albums for them to play. That reminded Xavi that he never turned in the old album collection left behind in his house... Maybe he'd do that soon.

He did like to keep it to himself, however. Days grew weary and he liked to keep that personal collection just to listen to stuff he'd never heard, or stuff he'd forgotten about until the moment the music began to play again. Then, the lyrics, the melodies, they all flooded back to him like the song had been on his mind all these years. The element of nostalgia was soothing for him, especially after a long day's work.

Something snapped him out of what seemed like driving on autopilot. A voice crackling with static seemed to pound into his ears.

"Aguilar, you there? Come in. Over."

Xavi grabbed the small radio from his console, yanking it off its stand and pulling it close to his face. He pressed the button and spoke into it, "Affirmative, Sheriff Snyder. Over."

"I'm at quadrant A's fence, over by the maintenance shed," Tom Snyder's voice responded. "Requesting back-up. There's something here you need to see to believe."

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Tom Snyder was compact and muscular. He almost always had a serious look in his nearly lifeless gray-blue eyes. He had a way of charming people thanks to his inner charisma, which is a lot to say for a man who rarely smiled. After he got reports of suspicious activity at the fence's perimeter and then went to check it out for himself to confirm the reports' The only other officer on duty that day was deputy Xavier Aguilar (who preferred to be called Xavi--with a 'Z' sound. Pronounced like Za-vee, which never made sense to Tom because Xavier sounded *nothing* like that), was the only other on-duty officer that day.

Tom stood by the impressive electric fence. A fence, in its behemoth wonder, surrounded the town and worked as a perfect barrier since its inception. No one went in, and no one went out, without permission. It was only for safety's sake. The whole town was in agreement on the fences' necessity. The town itself, its central hub, was a few miles inland from the outskirts of the fences. Things in Glenley were tight knit and compact, with only a few houses lying in the town's outskirts.

The main street where local businesses thrived and a little diner served every single person in town (seriously, there was no one who wasn't here at least once a week – best pancakes in all of Kentucky, at least Tom was convinced of it) served as the town's admirable attempt at a downtown hub. It was never a ghost town. There wasn't much else to do when the day's designated jobs were complete, so a lot of folk decided to hang out here.

Jobs were organized and the town survived on its ability to communicate with the outside world. Trading was invaluable to continuity. Every town, every city, as sparse as they were in these days, had something to offer in exchange for something else. Thirty minutes north was where New Venice (formerly a long stretch of towns and cities that bordered the Kentucky Dam and its contingents on the Tennessee River), a flooded metropolis of sorts, has claimed so much territory and with the hard work of its people, nabbed so many resources. As safe and as secure as this flooded city seemed, the city life just wasn't for everyone. It certainly wasn't for Xavi.

Glenley served as a smaller, more compact and bonded, living option for people of the more easy going lifestyle. Glenley had a few caverns where mining was big. People dug deep into the walls of these caves and pulled out very valuable natural resources that New Venice liked to lay its hands on. In exchange for these minerals, New Venice helped keep Glenley afloat. It was a very simple (not quite even, but Glenley was a gracious recipient) trade. New Venice knew it had an ally in its smaller compatriot, and allies were an even-more rare, sought-after, invaluable resource.

Xavi tugged at his belt as he exited his police car, as if his trousers were escaping their grip on his hip bone. There was no way they could though, for his belt was wrapped so tight. It was just a nervous tic Tom had gotten used to. He knew he could use that knowledge to his advantage at some point in the future, so he hadn't yet bothered to mention it to Xavi how conspicuous it was. A future lesson for him, Tom imagined.

"He's been standing there for hours," Tom said.

"Who's been standing where?" Xavi blurted at the sight of his superior, speaking in a voice fluctuating with anxiousness.

Tom pointed beyond the fence.

Xavi hadn't looked outside the fence in a long while, for there was rarely ever anything to see.

What surrounded the town of Glenley's electrified fences was nothing short of vast emptiness: Ground that consisted of gravel, shattered pavement, and the tangled plant and fungal life that grew over them. A few miles down the road was finally a sign of the civilization that they left behind: What once was the city of Cynthiana was left a ghostly shell of its former self.

The figure Tom had spotted wasn't conspicuously tall. But his hair, shaggy and unkempt in its place on his head and the wiry bits on his face hung in front of his eyes, looked greasy, dirty, and unwashed. His body, built and fit but not buff, lumbered slowly. He was pacing in place, rocking back and forth without really moving. It was an eerie sight.

Xavi's eyes never left the man, muttering the following like routine, "Are you sure he's not one of the, uh, the plagued, sir?"

Tom interrupted quickly before he could finish, already knowing what the deputy was insinuating, "He spoke. He freaked out Tamsin from the diner. She freaked out, going on about how someone was outside the fence, talking under his breath, just pacing around and looking lost and making her uncomfortable as all hell."

"She heard words, though? Like human speech I mean, sir?"

"Call me sir one more time," Tom started, a threateningly calm smile crossing his face, "And I'll shoot you where you stand. I'm *Tom*. Call me Tom. We've talked about this before."

Xavi simply nodded stiffly, uncomfortably. Tom saw his throat bulge and then retract quickly – a nervous gulp. Tom smirked in amusement, and carried on toward the gate to the fence.

"What are we going to do?" Xavi asked.

"Tamsin says he can talk, so let's see if our friend wants to make conversation," Tom said in a cheery tone. His voice lowering, invitingly, "You want to come with or no?"

Tom entered in the security code on the keypad to the gate. A hum and a buzz signaled the powering down of the electricity, allowing his hand to grip the handle and pull open the gate safely.

"I'm a little surprised I actually still remember that code," he muttered. He didn't intend to think out loud, but he did anyway.

Xavi was never the easiest person for Tom to converse with, so he had to resort to just blurting out his first thoughts every so often, just to get a small peep out of the guy. They liked each other, sure. Tom always told himself that it was very evident that Xavi was a good guy, and he would make a damned good cop too... if only he ever collected his last few badges and graduated from the Boy Scout's.

"Been that long?" was all Xavi could muster as a response.

Tom was surprised, impressed, that Xavi actually followed him out of the safety of the fence.

"Yeah," Tom replied. "It has. Make sure you don't forget to..."

He heard the buzz of the gate locking back up as Xavi shut it behind him.

"Never."

"I shouldn't have doubted you'd lock up. You're always so nervous."

Tom had no choice but to say it out loud. He was tired of this. He just wanted to get comfortable with his new future partner, not feel forced to make up the most flat conversation pieces he'd ever had just to stay sane around him.

"It's not really nervousness, it's erm--cautiousness."

"You're just reading me the first word on the Thesaurus under 'nervousness'... Let me give you a tip, Aguilar... Do you prefer Xavi or Aguilar?"

“Either’s fine, sir—*I mean Tom*,” Xavi spluttered.

“You can be nervous, there’s nothing wrong with that. In fact, I encourage it. Being nervous helps you in different facets, believe it or not, but... never show it. The victim and the culprit see it in your face once you let it break through your defenses, and just like *that*...” Tom said, with his middle finger and thumb placed on each other, snapping them in Xavi’s face with the word ‘that’.

“...You lose complete control of the situation.”

“Have you ever lost control of a situation?” Xavi asked intently.

Tom smiled, his hand wrapped around the gun at his waistband as he and Xavi got themselves closer to the figure. Back turned, he or she still hadn’t spotted – or cared – that they were nearby.

Tom’s voice was quiet, hoarse, as he explained, “When I first started out as a cop back in Indiana, my old supervisor was a burly guy, his name was Robert. And we went to a gas station. The owner back then was a Rutherford, stubborn old son of a bitch. A newcomer came into town one day, asking for directions -- stepped inside the gas station and asked Rutherford where to find the interstate to head back to the city; now, if there’s one thing all of us knew was this: Rutherford hated the city folk, detested them with all his heart -- and we never knew why.

“He never gave a reason, never felt he had to. He pulled out a shotgun on the tourists, asking them to step out of his gas station – but they got scared, they wouldn’t budge. The ones pumping gas called us. And I remember seeing the tourist man’s face, just completely stricken with fear. It was like that was it. He was going to die.”

Xavi interjected here, “Did he? Is that how you lost control?”

Tom put a hand up, thrown off by Xavi’s interruption, and continued, “All of us knew that Rutherford wasn’t going to pull the trigger; we knew him too well, but the tourist didn’t. I felt compassionate, and I smiled at him. He smiled back, and just with that I told him everything was going to be okay without ever having to open my mouth. And then I thought, what if I hadn’t smiled? What if I kept a serious face? A stern one? It’s kind of silly in retrospect. No, though... in response to your question, I’ve never lost control of any kind of situation... *Yet*.”

Almost an afterthought, Tom scoffed, mostly to himself, “I loved to relish in the irony that I of all people got him to put that gun down, as a former ‘city folk’ myself. Rutherford ended up dying two months after that. Heart failure – took the secret of why he hated city folk to the grave with him. Sad, really. We were all mighty curious.”

Xavi kept his attention glued to Tom the entire time, awestruck by the sincerity in his voice and his boasting without sounding cocky. This guy never failed to amaze and inspire him. They were getting closer to the mysterious figure.

Tom was the first to raise his voice to the figure ahead with a mighty “Hello?!”

The figure turned around inhumanly fast, eyes bulging and hair finally whipped away from the front of his face. This was a young kid. The kid’s brightly-colored irises shone through like headlights. His face stained by dried-on tears, this was the most tortured living face Xavi had ever seen. He pitied the kid, felt the emanating pain that he reeked of, almost immediately.

The kid wore a simple white tee a few sizes too large and blue jeans that were caked in dried blood. There was a tear in the shirt along the side, he only had one full sleeve left. His left arm hung at the side of his body limply, definitely and totally broken. Blood covered it, too, and Xavi winced nervously at the sight of this. Tom, however, kept his sight on the back of the kid's jeans, where the butt of a gun stuck out of it and a knife was holstered in a small sheath next to it.

"Kid?" Tom's voice was so smooth, so welcoming. Hospitality was always his strong suit, or so he'd heard. "My name is Tom, Tom Snyder. That blood on your clothes--does it belong to you?"

The young kid took a moment to respond. He swallowed, his highly-visible Adam's apple rolling down his neck and then back up. And then, his voice deep, but projected in a way that gave off a more masculine and threatening tone – "Only some of it."

He lifted his limp arm, revealing a bullet wound. It went through. Someone patched it up, but it was a poor, makeshift job. It was burnt around the edges. Likely a failed cauterization.

"Someone did this to you?" Tom asked.

"Yeah," the kid said simply, barely audible.

"I said my name, why don't you say yours?"

"You said *your* name, but your friend didn't say *his*."

These words were so shocking to Tom, simply because he wasn't even expecting a response at all. Especially not one so trained, so cautious. It was obvious to Tom now that this wasn't this kid's first rodeo.

The kid continued, "I'm not introducing myself until he—"

Xavi extended a hand. This gesture caused their guest to jump out of his skin. To calm him, Xavi smiled. "My name is Xavier, but you can call me Xavi. We just want to help."

The kid stared at Xavi's hand. He didn't grab it, didn't shake it, he just stared it down as if it were looking at him itself. Xavi slowly put his hand back down at his side, but the smile didn't leave his face.

"Were you looking for us?" Tom asked.

"I don't even know where the hell I am," their guest scoffed.

"Okay, okay," Xavi said. "You've come to Glenley."

"Glenley?" the kid's voice broke a bit. A hint of emotion. Tom, still so sucked into his eyes, just watched as they welled up, a single tear rolling down his cheek.

"You seem surprised," Xavi took note.

The kid just let the tears roll and he shook his head. Tom didn't expect a response. He knew the word 'Glenley' likely triggered some sort of memory, or meant something to him. He decided to go for something a little more general, a little more 'break-the-ice':

"Do you have a name, son?"

The kid looked at his hands. His eyes widened, as if he was looking at something foreign and frightening.

"I can't stop... My hands keep shaking..."

"When was the last time you'd eaten?" Xavi asked him.



The kid didn't answer, he just continued to look at his hands with such utter fascination. If his eyes got any bigger, they'd probably roll right out of their sockets.

"...They won't stop shaking..."

"Are you sick?" Tom asked suddenly.

"...My hands..."

"I asked you a question," Tom repeated. "Are you *sick*?"

"N-no," the kid said, his eyes finally peering up from his shaking hands.

"We have food, shelter, water, a bed to sleep in," Xavi stated calmly. "You need to eat something, and you need to get that arm looked at."

Tom's gaze fell to Xavi. He shook his head, disapprovingly. Xavi was moving too fast, too quickly. His approach was too risky, and Tom was cautious of how this kid would respond to such "aggressive kindness", as Tom liked to call it. His eyes wandered up and down this kid, looking for any other sort of protrusions or injuries.

The kid looked at both of them, a child-like innocence on his face as he mumbled with a soft smile, "I'm *supposed* to be here."

He suddenly buckled over, like a ton of bricks weighed down his stomach. Xavi rushed over quickly, catching the kid in his arms before his head made contact with the gravel. He was rolling about, unconscious.

As the two men lifted the one the kid and carried him toward the fence, neither could help but wonder what horrors this kid had seen. So many thoughts wandered through Tom and Xavi's heads, that none of them could be organized into something tangible or understandable.

The only thing Xavi remembered from this moment was how that song from The Rolling Stones danced its way into his head again as his eyes watched this broken kid stir in his arms:

*War, children, yeah, it's just a shot away.*