

THE TRUTH IS OUT THERE

A novel by **Les Martin**

Based on the television series

THE X FILESTM

created by **Chris Carter**

Based on the teleplay written

by **Glen Morgan** and
James Wong



#7 FEAR



THE FILES™

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Man vs. Machine

Ed returned to the sorting machine. He sat down and turned it on.

The envelopes started shooting in again. Ed's fingers punched the keyboard. The numbers flashed on the digital display.

13207 . . . 13090 . . . 08619 . . . KILL . . . 49548.

Ed's mouth dropped open even as his fingers kept automatically punching.

21227 . . . 10977 . . . KILL 'EM . . . 44310 . . .

Ed's gaze froze on the display. The big, busy room around him faded away. All he could see was the brightly lit message.

KILL 'EM ALL.

Ed Funsch was no longer bored to death.

He was scared to death.

Chapter ONE

Ed Funsch was bored to death. His job did that to him sometimes. Most times, in fact. But then he reminded himself that it was better than starving to death. Or sleeping in the streets. Which was what he would have been doing if he hadn't landed this job two months ago.

Ed was working for the Postal Service in Franklin, Pennsylvania. Seven hours a day, five days a week, he sat in front of a mail sorting machine in the Postal Center.

Today was a working day like all the others. An envelope whisked into the sorter. Ed looked into a slotlike window. In it the zip code was highlighted.

14141

Ed tapped out the numbers on a numeric keyboard.

A red digital display on the machine lit up.

14141

Ed checked the number, then punched a button.

The letter zipped off to its next stop on the delivery chain.

Another letter whisked in to replace it.

T H E X - F I L E S

02828

Ed tapped out the numbers.

02828

As the envelope zipped away, Ed glanced at his watch.

An hour and twenty minutes to lunch.

Then he looked back to see the next envelope arriving.

Ed had been working here a month now, one of many men in gray-and-blue uniforms at the Postal Center. By now he could do his work without thinking. He was free to think about other things.

One thing he thought more and more often was how much he hated the machine in front of him. It was the latest generation of sorting machines. It was supposed to be a great new tool for the working man.

What a laugh, Ed thought as he glared at the digital display. It was easy to see who was the tool. He wasn't running the machine. The machine was running him.

Suddenly he was jerked out of his thoughts.

The next envelope had jammed in the sorter.

Ed had to be grateful to envelopes like that. Funny-sized ones or ones with folds or wrinkles. They gave him something to do. Something that the machine couldn't. Not yet, anyway.

He reached in to free the envelope.

"Ouch!" he said, pulling his hand back.

He looked at his stinging finger. Blood was seeping out of it.

"A paper cut," he muttered, his stomach turning over.

The sight of blood made him feel sick, weaker than ever, more helpless than ever. He could practically feel the machine sneering at him. What chance did flesh and blood have against it? He started trembling with rage. He was seeing red, bloodred.

Just then a hand fell on Ed's shoulder.

Ed looked up. It was his supervisor, Harry McNally.

"Ed, you okay?" Harry asked, concerned. "You look pale as a ghost."

"Blood," said Ed, holding up his finger, still shaky.

Harry gave it a quick glance. "Just a paper cut, Ed." He paused, then said, "Still, if it really bothers you—"

"No, no," Ed said hastily. "You're right. It's nothing. Just about stopped bleeding already. I'll get right back to work. Gotta keep up with the job."

Harry cleared his throat. He looked uncomfortable.

"Ed," he said. "About that, the job I mean, I have to talk to you. Let's go over to the water cooler, where we can be by ourselves."

"But the letters," Ed said with a sinking feeling.

"Don't worry about them right now," Harry said. He reached around Ed and turned off the sorting machine.

Shoulders slumped, Ed stood up and followed Harry to the water cooler. He could guess what was coming. He had been through it before.

"Look, Ed, this is never easy," Harry said. "Everybody here likes you a lot. And I know it's tough because you're new in town. But, Ed, I'm sorry, I'm gonna have to let you go."

Ed didn't argue. He knew it would be useless. He just stood there, looking like a dog that had been whipped. A dog that hadn't done anything wrong. A dog looking at his master with accusing eyes.

Harry swallowed hard and explained, "It's not your work. Your work has been first-rate. And like I said, you're a good guy. But you know the story. There have been cutbacks. Downsizing. Budget problems—especially with the cost of new technology. And of course, with the new machines, we don't need as many—"

"Yeah, I know," Ed said. "It was like that with the last job I had. They got a machine that could do

my work twice as fast and good as me. They told me it wasn't my fault. It was just progress."

"Of course, they need people to make those machines," said Harry. "Maybe you can get a training course and—"

"Harry, I'm fifty-two years old," Ed said. "Think I can learn new tricks? And if I did, would anybody hire someone my age on a starter's level?"

Harry didn't say anything.

"Look, Harry," Ed said. "Could I maybe work part-time?"

Harry sighed. "Don't think I wouldn't let you. But I got my orders. I'll show you the fax if you want."

"Nah, I believe you," said Ed.

Harry reached into his pocket and pulled out an envelope. "The guys took up a collection for you. It's a hundred bucks."

Awkwardly he stuffed the envelope into Ed's shirt pocket. Then he said, "Why don't you stay on till the end of the week. Sorry, but that's the best I can do."

"Don't apologize," said Ed. "Not your fault. Not anybody's fault. That's the trouble. Everybody's got their orders—right out of some machine or other."

Harry coughed. He gave Ed a quick pat on the back and went off. Ed returned to the sorting

T H E X - F I L E S

machine. He sat down and turned it on.

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Chapter TWO

Gary Taber had no worries about getting sacked from his job. He was his own boss, selling real estate. The trouble was, business was bad. Folks weren't buying houses or farms. Money was scarce in town—and in his bank account. He barely had enough to pay the landlord. Office rent was steep on the top floor of the Commercial Trust Building. It was Franklin's version of a skyscraper, a full ten stories high.

Gary looked at his watch. Time for lunch. The whole morning had gone by without a sale. Or even a nibble. It made a man angry, seeing so many years of building up a business go down the drain. Pretty soon he'd have to start brown-bagging lunch. Or skipping it.

Not today, though. His stomach was rumbling. He buttoned the collar of his white shirt, adjusted the knot on his tie, put on his gray suit jacket, and turned on his answering machine. His mouth was watering as he headed for the elevator. Corned beef and cabbage was the special of the day at Mulloy's café down the street.

The elevator was empty when he got in, but not for long. The green digital display inside changed from 10 to 9 and Gary had to move to the back as people poured in. Above the heads of the crowd, he saw 8 flash on. More passengers came aboard, the usual lunchtime crush. The trip down seemed to take forever, with stops at every floor. Gary truly hated this elevator ride. Closed, crowded spaces drove him crazy. Maybe losing his office wouldn't be so bad. He'd be out on the street, but he'd never have to be stuck in this elevator again.

Gary looked at the digital display to see how many floors were left before he could get out of there.

It read: NO AIR.

Sweat poured down Gary's face. He mopped his forehead with the back of his hand. His lungs ached. All these people, hemming him in. If only they would go away.

CAN'T BREATHE, flashed the digital display.

Gary's hand clawed at his tie to loosen it. He backed away from the digital display, but his back hit the wall. There was nowhere to go.

The people near him edged away from him, pressing toward the front. But they had nowhere to go, either. They could only watch the digital display and see it flash 3, then 2.

They all shared a single unsaid thought. *Thank goodness this ride will soon be over.* In another minute the sweating, weaving, gasping, bug-eyed man in the back might be sick all over them. Or he might totally collapse. Whatever happened, they'd be late to lunch.

None of them could see what Gary Taber saw as he stared at the digital display.

If they had, they would have worried about more than lunch.

Gary's eyes seemed to bulge out of his head as he read:

KILL 'EM ALL!

"Four dead—not counting the killer," said Jim Spencer. He was a tall, powerfully built man with a neatly trimmed mustache and a sharply pressed uniform. He was the sheriff commander of Venango County, Pennsylvania, and he looked the part.

The man with him wore a slightly rumpled suit and could have used a haircut. He didn't look like what Spencer had expected to get when the sheriff asked the FBI Behavioral Science Unit for help.

Even the agent's name was off the wall. Who ever heard of a G-man with the first name Fox?

Still, Spencer was making the best of it. He had to. He needed someone to make sense out of a case

that was driving him crazy. As he told Mulder, "I'm relieved the bureau answered our request. Because in all honesty, whatever's going on is way over our heads."

"I expect that's why they sent me," Mulder told him. "Unusual cases are my specialty."

"I know that you people usually profile suspects still at large," said Spencer. "It must seem odd being asked to profile suspects who are all dead."

"As I said, 'odd' is par for the course," Mulder said.

The two men stood in the lobby of the Commercial Trust Building. In front of them a yellow ribbon was stretched chest high. On it bold black print declared, CRIME SCENE: DO NOT CROSS.

A deputy lifted the ribbon for them to duck under. They went to the elevator that stood with its door open. One body lay under a tarp halfway out the door. The other three bodies lay under tarps inside the elevator.

Mulder was all business. Swiftly he slid on latex gloves so as not to contaminate the crime scene. He moved into the elevator, with Spencer close behind.

As Mulder examined the corpses, Spencer continued to fill him in. "The suspect's body is out on the sidewalk. We're holding the security guard who shot him. Surviving witnesses from the elevator are

down at the hospital. You can talk to them whenever you're ready."

Mulder nodded, only half listening. Spencer watched him, his professional curiosity mixing with something close to awe. The sheriff had never seen an investigator work so fast. This was big-league stuff. A small-town lawman had a lot to learn from it.

After Mulder finished with the corpses, he turned to examine the elevator. He looked at the waist-high railing, the call buttons, the ceiling.

"We sketched the area, and we're set to dust for prints," Spencer said. He wanted the FBI man to know that, locals or not, they weren't total amateurs.

"Did that damage occur during the incident?" asked Mulder. He pointed to the digital display. It was bashed in.

Spencer hadn't noticed the wreckage. His face flushed. He swallowed and said, "I'll find out."

Mulder nodded. "May I see the suspect?"

"You can see what's left of him," said the sheriff.

Chapter THREE

"Things like this aren't supposed to happen here," said the sheriff as he and Mulder left the Commercial Trust Building.

"A forty-two-year-old real estate agent murders four strangers?" said Mulder. "That's not supposed to happen anywhere."

"Of course, of course," Spencer said. "But what I mean is, there's only been three murders in these parts since colonial times. That is, before this craziness started. In the last six months, seven people have killed twenty-two. In terms of population, you have any idea how high a homicide rate that is?"

"High," said Mulder. "Definitely high."

"It's higher than the combined homicide rates of Detroit, Washington, D.C., and Los Angeles," said Spencer. "Combined."

He grabbed Mulder by the arm. "Franklin is not remotely like any of those cities," Spencer said. "We're simple, ordinary folk around here, all getting along together. There's no glitz and no ghettos. No riots and no muggings."

Mulder nodded. "Point taken," he said.

Satisfied, Spencer led him outside. Halfway down the block a body lay under a tarp. There was dried blood around the covering. Uniformed police officers were keeping onlookers away. The cops and civilians shared the same stunned look.

“After each outbreak of violence, the suspect was killed?” Mulder asked Spencer.

“Suicide by cop,” Spencer said.

“Which means?” asked Mulder.

“Each killing spree occurred in a public place,” Spencer explained. “The suspect went berserk and would not stop when ordered. Officers on the scene had to use deadly force to save lives.”

“Were the suspects checked for substance abuse?”

“Agent Mulder,” Spencer said, “this town is made up mostly of apple and cherry growers. These folks don’t even drink much. They certainly don’t do drugs.”

“Were they checked?” Mulder persisted.

“Yes,” Spencer said. “The coroner’s tests were negative.”

Mulder squatted, lifted the tarp, and began looking over the bullet-ridden body of Gary Taber.

The sheriff forced himself not to turn his eyes away. But his face went pale.

“I played softball with this guy over Labor Day,” he said. “He was one of those real nice guys. The